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Little White Lies

TRUTH & MOVIES

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SHIRLEY

LWLIES 86

FEATURE

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Shirley

Directed by **JOSEPHINE DECKER**
Starring **ELISABETH MOSS, ODESSA YOUNG, MICHAEL STUHLBARG**
Released **30 OCTOBER**

Josephine Decker's stunning anti-biopic of author Shirley Jackson offers a treatise on female creativity and camaraderie.

For all her mastery of horror, author Shirley Jackson had a flair for arch humour that bordered on the camp. Her slender 1962 page-turner 'We Have Always Lived in the Castle' ends on an exchange between the Blackwood sisters that shows a deep irreverence for the macabre events that came before, and leaves the reader smiling ruefully.

There are similar tonal values to Josephine Decker's *Shirley*, an adaptation of Susan Scarf Merrell's semi-fictional novel of the same name. Elisabeth Moss channels a ghoulish pantomime energy in the title role that, from an actress of her subtlety and breadth, is a deliberate creative choice. *Shirley* is not so much *about* the writer Shirley Jackson as it is a concocted psychodrama infused by the qualities of her work, where the real and the imagined co-exist in queasy disharmony, and women escape male dominance through use of an invented secret language.

Shirley Jackson died in her sleep in 1965 at the age of 48, having spent the final 20 years of her life in North Bennington, Vermont, with her disloyal husband Stanley Hyman. A literary critic for *The New Yorker*, he by this point worked as a lecturer at Bennington College while the increasingly agoraphobic Shirley stayed home wrestling her stories onto the page. *Shirley* is set during the time that our antiheroine is working on an idea that would become the 1951 novel 'Hangsaman', loosely based on the disappearance of college student Paula Jean Welder.

Paula may have been real, but Rose (Odessa Young) and Fred Nemser (Logan Lerman) are fictional entry points to the cloistered domestic world that Shirley and Stanley (Michael Stuhlbarg) inhabit. The film opens on the fresh-faced young couple sitting on a train to Bennington. Rose is reading Jackson's 'The Lottery' in *The New Yorker* – a short story that yielded record-breaking amounts of reader feedback, much of it hate mail. Rose, however, is so aroused that she seduces Fred to the bathroom for a quickie. Afterwards she looks at herself in mirrored surfaces. Decker cuts together shots by DoP Sturla Brandth Grøvlen in such a way that reflections and reality blend, setting the tone for what is to come.

Decker's fourth feature is her first without regular DoP Ashley Connor and her first directing a script written by someone other than herself, in this case Sarah Gubbins (*I Love Dick*). The result is a fusion of styles that does not always cohere. With previous features *Butter on the Latch*, *Thou Wast Mild and Lovely* and *Madeline's Madeline*, Decker developed a trademark technique of telling female-led stories by plunging into the senses and sidelining narratives by centring the chaotic intensity of feeling alive. *Shirley* has a more conventional script, replete with sparkling lines of dialogue, yet Decker's taste for undoing the seams of characterisation shows up in the film's visual language, as the frenetic, handheld camera is thrown at the subjects as if trying to get under their skin. This is a film trying to wriggle out of the straitjacket of its own story, the better to reveal the symbiotic passions within its two leading ladies.

When Rose and Fred arrive at the Bennington house, there is a party in full swing. Stanley is out front playing master of ceremonies. Shirley festers in an armchair inside, surrounded by acolytes hanging on her every poisonous word. The Nemsers are supposed to stay for only a short spell, as Fred settles into his new post at the college, but it doesn't turn out that way. Stanley cajoles Rose into taking on the role of the housekeeper so she spends her days cooped up in the house with Shirley, while the men are on campus all day and sometimes all night.

Shirley cuts through the hero worship coming from her ingenue houseguest with such brutality that Rose tells Fred: "She's a fucking monster." Pedestal out of the way, up springs an intimate dynamic. Rose cooks, cleans, assists. She starts as a nanny, evolves into a friend and then it's a short leap into something more creatively and erotically inspiring. Their conversations become Shirley's drafts, narrated by Moss, who envisages her newest creation with Rose's face. Metafictional nods to Jackson's most famous stories are everywhere, and as her fiction was informed by details of her life, the result is an ever-narrowing spiral of themes: a succession of Russian Dolls full of lost girls, banal oppressors and magical witchcraft.

Moss leans into teeth acting, snarling and smiling with gentle delirium. Her lack of make-up, lank hair and tendency to hide in bed in a white nightdress contrasts with Rose who looks every inch the fragrant faculty wife. Young injects this doll-like avatar with such vulnerability and curiosity that she is the revelation. Her character is a foil, there to bear witness to the force of nature that is Shirley's domestic life, yet she emerges on her own terms as the lost girl at the centre of it all.

If Rose is Shirley's protagonist then Stanley is her antagonist. He is abominable one moment, charismatic the next. Michael Stuhlbarg's performance is ever shifting. He is an energetic, nimble Rumpelstiltskin, waiting for his wife to spin gold, patronising her like a precocious child. She has the talent. He has the social freedom. They have an arrangement whereby he is allowed affairs. Neither is interested in leaving or improving their toxic partnership. It is presented as inevitable. "Let's pray for a boy," Shirley whispers to Rose about her unborn child. "The world is too cruel for girls."

The residual impression is that these women are trapped and there's nothing in their supernatural understanding that changes this. The chord Decker plucks with *Shirley* is from the interior world, where women's wild energies have the room to play out in full. It's the same place from which fiction flows, and the thwarted can have their day to do with whatever they will. Decker shows us the real cage and she shows us the imaginary freedom – a sanctuary that is weighted with more importance than any real-life devastation. As Shirley Jackson wrote in one of her journals: "Writing is the way out." **SOPHIE MONKS KAUFMAN**

ANTICIPATION. *Decker x Moss x Shirley Jackson. How much raw female creativity can one film hold?* **5**

ENJOYMENT. *What a pleasure to see trapped women escaping through imagination, sensuality and friendship.* **4**

IN RETROSPECT. *A bewitching – if discordant – attempt to bottle the atmosphere of Jackson's particular genius.* **4**

OH, IT'S YOU AGAIN.

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No ...eh...
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WORDS AND INTERVIEW BY JOURDAIN SEARLES ILLUSTRATION BY AMY MOSS

UNLEASH: THE JOSEPHINE DECKER STORY

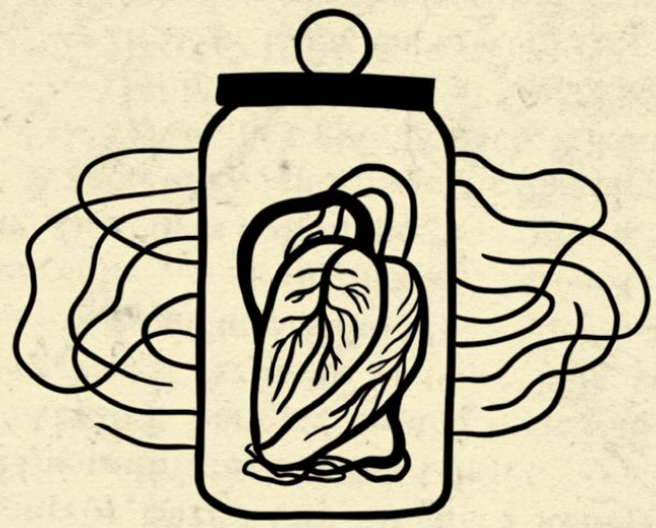
Revealing the intuitive, energetic filmmaking style of the singular director behind *Shirley*.

The 2014 rural thriller *Thou Wast Mild and Lovely* by Josephine Decker begins with a rush of unbridled energy and emotion. A father and daughter are play-fighting in the grass with a dead chicken. The daughter is a bit too old for this and the way they move together is too intimate. They thrust and stab each other with it. They roll around in the ground together, tossing it back and forth. The moment is uncomfortably sexual, which is further amplified by the opening narration: "For all my life, I missed my lover. I wanted my lover. I wanted to be near my lover. But the way my lover opened and closed my legs, the way my lover unfolded me into my lover's breast… My lover knows how to love me. But things kept getting in the way of my lover, and I could not be with my lover until now."

These words are heard over images of grass which segues to a shot of an agitated farm dog with big eyes and walnut fur. The words are mesmerising, and immediately set the mood of the film. These words are spoken by the film's heroine, Sarah (Sophie Traub) in a soft, lilting voice. But according to Decker, Sarah wasn't originally the narrator. "It was the voiceover of a cow. So it was this heavily Southern-accented cow that talked throughout the movie. But it was just funny and it didn't really… It added something but…" she trails off. Seeing the film in its current form, it's difficult to imagine how a cow's narration would mesh with such a tense, deeply human narrative.

That's what's exciting about Decker – she never limits her imagination. She's always looking for the most interesting way to tell a story. Raised in Texas, Decker eventually attended Princeton University, where she directed her first short film *Naked Princeton* in 2005. She went on to make even more short films as well as performance art. In 2010, Decker made headlines for stripping naked on the last day of Marina Abramovic's MoMa retrospective, 'The Artist is Present'. Though she has been working as a filmmaker for over a decade, Decker has only recently been thrust into the spotlight due to the success of 2018's experimental coming of age drama *Madeline's Madeline*, and her most recent, *Shirley*, a biopic/psychodrama on the American horror author Shirley Jackson.

Five years after co-directing the documentary *Bi the Way* with Brittany Blockman, Decker released her first solo feature film *Butter on the Latch* in 2013. It was made with a crew of three and boasted a DIY quality that only added to its charm. *Thou Wast Mild and Lovely* was her second film and a slightly larger production, funded by a successful Kickstarter campaign. Now, in the wake of *Shirley*'s critical success, Decker is making her rounds in the arthouse world, recommending films from the Criterion Collection and being interviewed by Martin Scorsese. But even now that



she's working with big names such as Elisabeth Moss and Michael Stuhlbarg, Decker gives all the credit to her collaborators.

While developing *Madeline's Madeline*, Decker chose to build the narrative around her lead actress, newcomer Helena Howard. "With *Madeline's Madeline* it was very special," Decker recalls. "I was teaching at Union Arts Teen Festival in New Jersey. You teach workshops but also give feedback to actors who perform for you. Helena performed a jaw-droppingly good scene. And I had wanted to build something with actor's improvisation, letting their lives and bodies sculpt the movie. Things went well with Helena, and we ended up working for two years together." The symbiosis between actor and director can be felt in the film itself – Howard commands the screen, with Decker following her lead, trusting lead actress' instincts and giving her room to explore.

"When crafting films, Decker shares authorship with her collaborators. She's generous with compliments, and is quick to explain how each member of her crew contributed to the final product."

These choices give *Madeline's Madeline* a feeling of pure spontaneity and raw emotion. The film tells the story of a young woman named Madeline dealing with mental illness and a troubled relationship with her mother, played brilliantly by Miranda July. But as she comes of age, Madeline is finding herself as an actress. Quickly, scene work begins to blend in with reality and it's hard to tell if what we're watching is happening in real life, in a theater space, or in Madeline's own mind. It's a film that seems to have its own opinion about the fact that it's being watched, and the audience comes away disturbingly aware that they are voyeurs intruding on Howard's brilliant creative process.

When crafting films, Decker shares authorship with her collaborators. She's generous with compliments, and is quick to explain how each member of her crew contributed to the final product. When asked about the editing in her films, Decker gushes about her frequent collaborator David Barker, who was lead editor on *Thou Wast Mild and Lovely* and *Shirley*. Decker is quick to credit him for their quality: "They both have his touch on them, which is really defining," Decker tells me, eagerly. In a 2016 interview with *Filmmaker Magazine*, Barker is described as having an "open, unconventional approach" to crafting films, which is perhaps why he's such a great match for Decker. "He trained with Godard's editor, so he knows his stuff," she says with excitement in her voice. "He's so good at finding ways to help the audience get inside a character's mind."

It was Barker's idea to add voiceover to the writing scenes in *Shirley*. Decker describes the process in detail: "David came up with all those sections of hearing Shirley's writing. For the movie to work you really had to care about it and know how it was going. That's not something that was necessarily clear in dialogue between the performers. It was David who asked: 'What if we could hear the

writing while it was happening and get a sense of how it's progressing?' Sarah got on board with that idea and wrote these incredible first drafts of different parts of Shirley's books. I think it's so exciting because you get to really feel Shirley writing."

Shirley is a unique take on the biopic that takes real elements of horror author Shirley Jackson's life and blends them with a fictional story. The film, based on the novel by Susan Scarf Merrell, portrays an explosive sapphic relationship between Jackson (Elisabeth Moss) and a housewife who moves into her home along with her husband, an aspiring

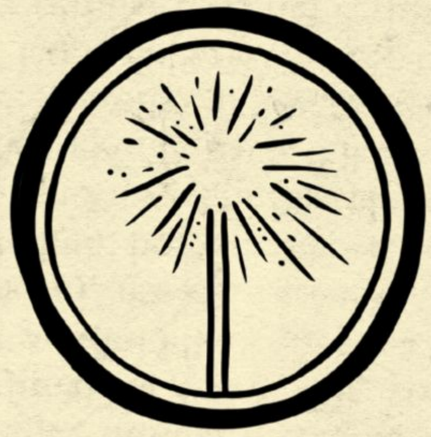
"Through the filter of Decker's mind, *Shirley* is less biopic and more Gothic horror."

professor seeking employment at the local liberal arts college. Rose (Odessa Young) is pregnant and unhappily married to a man (Logan Lerman) who doesn't respect her intelligence. Shirley rarely leaves her room or the house she shares with her husband (Michael Stuhlbarg), a philandering professor with a superiority complex. Together, the four of them exchange cruelties while secretly exploring their private sexual desires. The throughline of the film is a novel Shirley is writing inspired by a girl who recently went missing near the college. Soon, Rose becomes Shirley's muse and together they embark

on a caustic artistic partnership. Through the filter of Decker's mind, *Shirley* is less biopic and more Gothic horror, incorporating themes from Jackson's own work, giving the film a unique, ethereal look.

Decker achieved this with a variety of vastly different shooting styles, with handheld camera being chief among them. "I never thought that we would shoot so much of *Shirley* handheld, but when we started what we were getting with the handheld was just so transcendent," she explains. "I would say it's about being present and inviting the audience to be present with me. So that means paying attention to the moment. I've ended up shooting so many films handheld because I love the more flexible conversation that allows between the camera – which I think of as the eye of the audience – and the performers. There's this back and forth between the camera and the performers that I love."

Still, Decker and DoP Sturla Brandth Grøvlen had to get creative to fully realise their vision for the film.



Decker broke their process down into detail: "We had five different concepts for the camera. One was called 'Float' for the Paula visions. We used a dolly sometimes, but then we started using the Lensbaby, which created this blurring in-and-out of focus effect. We had another approach called 'Creature' which we were using for the more magical moments between Shirley and Rose. We tried to do something where the camera was like an animal, like a baby you hold close, so it stays close to the performers. And if you have to move the performers, it has to crawl along with them. We had a more action-based concept which we used for a lot of Stanley scenes which was really guided by

the body moving through space, letting the camera follow the body and guide the momentum. And then we made a shot concept for the town where it looked stiff and almost unreal in a way because we wanted it to feel like the only real reality was inside that house. So in contrast, the town could almost feel like you're walking into one of Shirley's stories." Decker concludes her descriptions with a laugh. "Usually a movie gets easier to shoot as you go along, but not in this case."

When discussing her films, Decker has a detailed memory of all her choices, which includes the hypnotic film scores. "I think for me, because I'm an editor and was a musician when I was younger, when I find the music, I find the energy I want in the movie as a whole," she explains. "It helps push the trajectory forward." To Decker, the sound of her films goes hand-in-hand with the themes. "With my films, the throughline is they're navigating subjectivity and objectivity and they're dipping from one into the other. And it's important that the sound be your guide when you're moving from an interior mental space to an exterior reality space. The sound has to create the context and lead you from one reality to the other."

And yet with this need for specificity, *Shirley* was the first film where Decker worked directly with a composer. "First we had a temp score that was compiled with music that I enjoy, like Meredith Monk and Caroline Shaw and some other terrific composers. But then we got to work with Tamar-kali on the real score and she just did such a beautiful job," Decker says excitedly. "I think she really appreciated the influences that were there already and I thought she brought such a strong tapestry to the film."

Decker's approach to filmmaking is often a loose, spontaneous process. "Sometimes what I'll want to do is complex and it's not always script-based," she explains. "It's sort of like the script is an excuse to get all the people together in the space but then you really wanna do something that can transcend the script and transcend any pre-ordained ideas." Ultimately, she's a highly experimental filmmaker who isn't invested in having total control of every aspect of production. For Decker, working with collaborators is all about allowing them the space to experiment. "Unleash them! Unleash their instincts, unleash their possibilities and let them go as far as they want"

WORDS AND INTERVIEW BY HANNAH WOODHEAD ILLUSTRATION BY AMY MOSS

IT'S COMPLICATED

THE TALE OF ELISABETH MOSS

The star and producer of *Shirley* on the enticements of strong, complex female characters.

Somewhere between arthouse and studio picture, *Shirley* feels like a natural fit for Elisabeth Moss, who was catapulted to stardom on the back of performances on the small screen in *Mad Men* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. In film she has tended to skew more indie: she's a mainstay of Alex Ross Perry's filmography, and delivered a blistering performance as a musician battling multiple demons in 2019's *Her Smell*. Her penchant for playing complex, unpredictable women has made her one of the most interesting actors working today - and her wonderfully wicked performance as the objectionable, enchanting Shirley Jackson allows her to demonstrate a unique talent for being achingly vulnerable and unexpectedly acerbic in a single breath.

LWLies: What was it about Sarah Gubbins' script for* Shirley *that drew you in?
Moss: How do you describe a good script? It was just brilliant. This was a unique, brilliant way of looking at her story, and it felt more like a Shirley Jackson novel than a Shirley Jackson biopic, which I thought was really intriguing. It felt very different from anything I'd ever played – but I think it was all those factors, not really just one thing.

How familiar were you with Shirley Jackson at that point? Had you read a lot of her work?
No, not really. I'd read 'The Lottery', but that was it. I knew who she was, but I wasn't that familiar with her work. I think that's true for a lot of people,'The Lottery' is this story everyone reads in school, and 'The Haunting of Hill House' is her most famous work.

Traditionally male authors – like Kerouac or Bukowski or Hemingway – have been given free rein to be difficult and unpleasant in the name of genius. It feels like this is one of the first times I've seen a female author given the same licence to be that complex.
Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I will say that the portrayal of her in the film is based on a work of fiction so it's kind of an anti-biopic. In real life Shirley was definitely not as unpleasant, and she was a great mom and she was a great homemaker. But I do think it's interesting that it's much more unusual to have a female character that is an anti-hero or an anti-heroine or is considered abrasive or difficult. And I think that's also just true of life – as women, it's expected of us to not be that unpleasant.

It's so refreshing that Shirley and Rose delight in being objectionable, particularly in the oppressive, very male-dominated world that they live in.
And even though Shirley was a bit more pleasant in real life, she was definitely a trailblazer and a woman who really was doing it all: she was a mom; she had a house; and then she was also a prolific writer churning out a lot of material in a short amount of time. She was very much alone as a woman in that field. It was so fun for me to play somebody who is that abrasive and difficult and honest. And to get to really just see what the character meant and not hold back. If she was in a bad mood, she was in a bad mood and it didn't feel like you had to put a smile on your face and be pleasant.

It reminded me a lot of your performance in* Her Smell*. I feel like there's a line between Becky and Shirley, in that they're both these extremely talented women who are also incredibly difficult. Have you noticed any connections in the roles that you choose?
Yeah, I think there is a connection but it's random because I don't *try* for there to be a connection. I think I just like playing strong, complicated people. I guess it's not a conscious thing on my part – that's what I enjoy. Acting is complicated, but I guess these interesting women do become a through-line in my work.

Given that you've been acting for a long time, have you seen a change in the kind of scripts you get given and the kind of parts you're asked to read for?

I definitely think that in the past decade, there have been more and more complicated, interesting characters who are women, and that it is more on a par with what the men have gotten for a very long time. I do think that's something which has come to the forefront. If you look at the kind of movies that are coming out, whether it's big Marvel movies or whether it's smaller films like *Promising Young Woman* or *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. I do think that from big to small films, and on television as well, there is this gigantic movement towards complicated, interesting female characters.

"From big to small films, and on television as well, there is this gigantic movement towards complicated, interesting female characters."

When you came together for pre-production, what kind of conversations were you having with Josephine and Michael about the kind of characters you were about to leap into?

My pre-production was long on this because I'm a producer as well so it started with casting and it started with crewing-up and everything. I worked on it for nine months before we started filming. Michael came on really early, he was our first and only choice. A lot of our process was reading her stories, reading any biographical material that we could get our hands

on, reading letters that we got from the Library of Congress between Stanley and Shirley, and between Shirley and her friends and between Stanley and his friends. We pored over that material together for the week before we started because that's just how the scheduling worked out, and we just kind of dove in. There were a lot of conversations previously and there was a lot of research done, but in the end we just had this incredible script that Sarah Gubbins wrote, and that was our map. It was all there.

Like you say, the script really does feel like a Shirley Jackson novel. It's very dark but there's this biting wit which really can't be undersold. It's such a funny film.

And Shirley and Stanley were such funny people. You can see from their letters and what I've heard from one of their sons, Laurence, that they both had a great sense of humour and I do think that that is reflected in the film, even though there are things that are fictional and there are things that are not true. But there are elements of who they really were that are really strong: their passion for each other; their humour; their dedication to their work and writing.

You mentioned you spoke to Laurence about his mother. Did you feel any kind of pressure to get your portrayal right, because even though it is fictionalised, it's still a real person?

Yeah, we did kind of feel pressure in the beginning. But I said to Michael, 'You know what we have to do now? We have to let that go. We have to play our version of Shirley and Stanley, and we have to have faith in that and we have to have faith in the work that we've done, and do the movie that's in front of us.' So we did get over it

WORDS AND INTERVIEW BY ADAM WOODWARD ILLUSTRATION BY AMY MOSS

POCKETFUL OF IRREVERENCE

A MICHAEL STUHLBARG SAGA

The renowned character actor reveals how Josephine Decker nudged him out of his comfort zone.

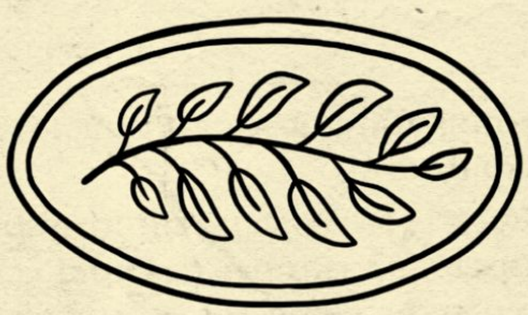
The first time we see Michael Stuhlbarg in *Shirley*, he's smiling broadly, slightly inebriated, and wearing a laurel wreath. To the ancient Greeks, these ornate headdresses were a symbol of strength and virility; the Romans used them to decorate commanders following a successful military campaign, garlands for great men. It's with some irony, then, that Stuhlbarg should be adorned with one here – its glorious connotations belie the seedy nature of his character, the prominent literary critic Stanley Hyman, whose tumultuous relationship with Shirley Jackson is the subject of Josephine Decker's sublime fifth feature. Though as Stuhlbarg explains, the real-life Stanley – and the task of playing him — was far more complicated than even the film suggests.

LWLies: Whose idea was the laurel wreath?
Stuhlbarg: That was mine. We wanted to convey the hysteria of creating a party and the games that were meant to be going on, and perhaps welcoming a young, naive, intimidated couple into his lair, so to speak. I thought it might be fun to wear a laurel wreath. I even wanted to take it as far as wearing a toga or something like that but eventually we threw that idea away.

You've played a fair number of real-life historical figures. When you're not necessarily having to hew too closely to the truth, does that give you more freedom to find the character?
I guess it depends upon the actor who's approaching the situation. Me, honestly, I thought going into [*Shirley*] that we were presenting who the real people were, and then over the course of my preparation I learned, 'Okay, it's based on this novel; the novel is a fiction.' And this story even takes a step further and does its own kind of thing. Plus Josephine has a very interesting vocabulary, visually, so she was going to see the story from a different perspective as well. I guess there's a limit to how much of the truth one can know about those who actually loved, and this circumstance allowed me to find as much of the real person as I could. Even when a character is placed in an extremely odd, fictional, almost dream-like situation, I'll try to keep in mind what I know about them and apply it. What it does allow you is, it's okay if something comes out feeling false, I suppose. There is a pocketful of irreverence that we each bring with us.

Is there a danger that you can get too close to knowing your subject? You might find out something about them that you maybe you don't like which could colour your perception of them.
Josephine constantly reminded us that we weren't presenting the real people. And as much as I had delved into who the real guy was, it was important to me to pay attention to both sides of what we were doing: presenting as much of the real guy as I thought this version of him might have been, combined with what Josephine's vision was. There were aspects of the character I played where I'll never really know if Stanley was really like that; however, I did hear some things and there is historical evidence for some of his behaviour that one can see in the film.

My favourite moment in the film is when you say, 'So you think it might be* that *good?'. I love Elisabeth's reaction. Was that workshopped at all or did it just come in the moment?
I think it was just play. We didn't really plan how that scene would end up because it's in between a lot of things. It's kind of the climax of the story up to that point; frustration on Stanley's part with Shirley and her situation and why she's chosen this particular subject [for her next book]. So there's some exasperation there but there's always love underneath their bickering, and a deep appreciation for each other's gifts. And maybe it



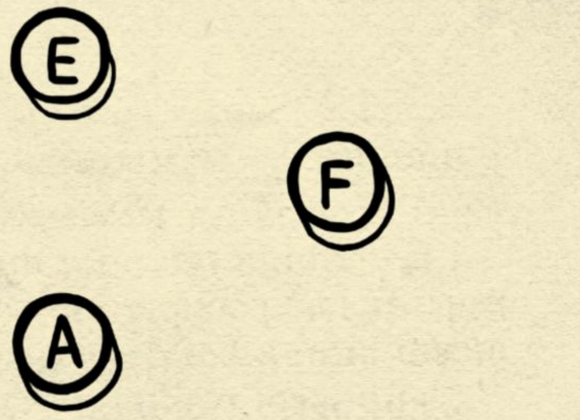
was a moment of understanding, for him. I kind of love the idea that it felt like as much as it seems they were just arguing again, he understood how much this meant to her as well.

There's a ring of 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?' to it.

Yes, well, we drew not specifically from that text itself but from the legend, the iconography, the memory of those performances in the film of that story. It was very much a colour of the novel as well as the screenplay, and it influenced how I sought to speak the language as well. I'd been wanting, just for the fun of it, for the group of us to get together and read the play out loud, but we didn't have time. They seem cut from the same cloth, shall we say.

Are you someone who prefers to really soak yourself in a character before filming, or do you try to keep as much of it fresh for when you get to set?

It varies between each project depending on how the director approaches things. Danny Boyle, for instance, allowed us a rehearsal period for each portion of the Steve Jobs film I worked on. We had two weeks of rehearsals for each section of that story, until we could run it like a play. That was singular for me, unlike any other experience I've ever had. I think a lot of filmmakers are afraid of rehearsing because they don't want to wear out a moment that might be found by an actor, they don't want the actor necessarily to know what they're gonna do before. Sometimes it's nice to have the opportunity to experience something for the first time on set. To be present on the day, you can allow yourself to be wide open to what you're receiving, and that can be just as much of a mystery or a surprise because you don't know what's going to come at you. For instance, say a character of mine has to watch a piece of videotape and have an honest reaction to it. That happened to me on a film I made many years ago called *After School*. I didn't want to see it beforehand – I wanted to just go up on the day, think about where the camera was, practise the camera movement, and then actually watch the video for the first time. That's what we ended up using in the film, which was an honest reaction, to some extent. That's only something you get once. I love that about film, because ideally what keeps the art alive are those accidents, those moments where you don't know what's going to happen.



"I had five days on a Ridley Scott film playing the smallest character in the movie, Leonardo DiCaprio's lawyer – I just had to pick up the phone and say something like, 'She wants that car as part of the divorce'."

Would you ever be put off by a director who made you do a hundred takes?

No, that would be wonderful! I had five days on a Ridley Scott film where I was practically playing the smallest character in the movie, Leonardo DiCaprio's lawyer – I just had to pick up the phone and say something like, 'She wants that car as part of the divorce'. And he had me do it I don't know many times, over and over until I wasn't acting any more. He really knows how to get people out of their head, into their body and the situation; not thinking, just doing it by instinct. So it doesn't look like anybody's acting, I guess. That's thrilling, for me. So no, I don't think I'd ever be thrown by what a director wanted, unless it involved something dangerous

WRITER'S ROOM #1: MELISSA MATHISON WRITING *E.T. THE EXTRA TERRESTRIAL* (1982)

ILLUSTRATION BY JASON NGAI

WORDS AND INTERVIEW BY LILLIAN CRAWFORD

THE SOUNDS OF TAMAR-KALI

A guide to the tricks of the soundtrack trade with the woman behind *Shirley*'s thrilling score.

Tamar-kali is a singer-songwriter and composer based in New York. She began writing film scores for director Dee Rees, including *Pariah* and *Mudbound*. They also collaborated on *The Last Thing He Wanted*, one of three scores by Tamar-kali which premiered at Sundance Film Festival in 2020, along with Kitty Green's *The Assistant* and Josephine Decker's *Shirley*. She's currently working on a project with LA Opera and the score for Fisher Stevens' *Palmer*.

ON APPROACHING *SHIRLEY*

"One of the things that struck me about the film once I initially began speaking with Josephine was that it had been kempt so uniquely. She had a very distinct taste in music – it's very broad and open. And we talked about the female voice being a lead instrument in it, and because I've been performing and recording rather than singing most of my career, I thought it would be great to be able to lean on my classical choral training. Then Josephine's push was just to really go wild with it. So really the inspiration came from the film itself. Because this film was based on a fictional work about Shirley's life, I was more interested in just finding out about who she was as a woman and this life of being a faculty wife on the Bennington campus. The music was coming from the psychological underpinnings of the plot and how the characters interacted with each other. And then this idea of voicing the women in the film."

ON BECOMING A FILM COMPOSER

"In my five-piece alt-rock band [Psychochamber Ensemble] I have instrumental music – it doesn't frighten me. I like just being able to sit with your thoughts and have a vibe going without lyrical content and a direction, because vocal content points you in a direction. Instrumental music in a rock setting, or non-classical setting, is great because it sets a mood and people can go on a journey that's not dictated by the lyrics. I've had a chamber ensemble for a number of years which is all female instrumentalists, a string sextet and voice. When Dee Rees asked me to score *Mudbound*, I hadn't planned on going into film. Because we had a rapport from me lending music to her debut, *Pariah*, she offered me this and I just respect her artistry so much."

ON FEMALE INFLUENCES

"So many women have influenced me, from PJ Harvey and Betty Davis to Kate Bush and Patti Smith. I come from that storyteller-songwriter background. But in terms of composers, before I ever thought of film music in a real way, there were moments that stood out to me. I remember Lesley Barber's score for *When Night is Falling* – it made an impression on me, from the music being this intrinsic part of the film experience. I just remember that for me when I recollected that film my enjoyment of the film was intrinsically tied to the music. In terms of contemporary composers, I'm really excited about Missy Mazzoli, Ellen Reid, and trying to learn more about their work. I was really impressed by Mica Levi's work when she first came on the scene. It was really exciting to see her nominated for the Oscar."

ON WRITING FOR A SPECIFIC PERIOD

"I have never done a period score. Perfect example with *Shirley*: so many people go, 'Oh, it's a horror film!' because it's about Shirley Jackson and I'm like, 'Pay attention!' In the same way with *Mudbound* people assumed I had done a period score when it's a contemporary classical chamber piece. I think that sometimes people have a hard time separating the music from the film, and if they're not particularly music savvy, it's just going to be like a guilty-by-association situation. I really just try to go from an emotional, psychological space. It depends on what the director's requesting, what they have in mind, and how I'm responding to the work. I think there's an aspect of music that's timeless when you're writing from emotions, so the score is kind of like this vehicle to transport the viewer into the world of the film on a psychological trip. The diegetic music being period makes sense, but the score is almost this ephemeral thing that's like the veil between you and the world of the film and there are times where you pierce it and fall in. It doesn't have to mimic literally the time of the piece."

ON MINIMALISM AND SILENCE

"Silence is often required. I was really impressed by Kitty Green. She's quite young and wise beyond her years, she has such strength in trusting her instincts. I always talk about *The Assistant* as a demonstration of how it's the many tiny fissures that collapse the organ – it's not some one-time, super-dramatic event. It's about the building and the testing of boundaries and the creation of this toxic environment which you don't even realise you're in. It was very important that the score be in service to that purpose. Kitty already had the idea that she wanted to use it like bookends at the start and end. Then the third piece goes over the credits because it's the type of film you have to take a minute and sit with. The third piece of music eases the viewer's transition from the film back out into the world, and all these things you have to think about now. Whereas *Shirley* ends with the diegetic music they're dancing to, which I thought was great. It's like the score accompanies Rose out of the film, and then we're just left with Shirley and Stanley. Their relationship is something special. Oof!"

ON WORKING WITH JOSEPHINE DECKER

It was just me, alone, in a room, going for it. There are layers in there people might never be aware of, there's a three-part harmony or something like that. But I don't want to go over the edge because I don't want to push the director to the point where they throw something out that's actually good. However, when I showed it to Josephine her first response was just, 'Go for it! Go wild!' She was open to just going there; there was this intensity that she requested. She had played piano for some time of her life so her taste in music is not just as a listener. So that gives you a completely different layer of exploration and listening going on there. I just want to know what we might cook up in future because I have no idea, and that's a wonderful space to be in, where you're just like, 'Where we going? Don't know, but it's all good 'cause it's gonna be fun!' I definitely have that affinity for her and being excited about someone's creativity is a great place to be. I would love to work with her again

BEYOND THE VISIBLE

HILMA AF KLINT

"BRISTLES WITH THE EXCITEMENT OF DISCOVERY" NEW YORK TIMES

"ONE OF THE BEST FILMS I'VE SEEN ABOUT FINE ART... STAGGERING DEPTH" ROGEREBERT.COM

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THE GUARDIAN

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ModernFilms

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WORDS BY JOHN SEMLEY ILLUSTRATION BY SOPHIE MO

A SHROOM OF ONE'S OWN

Cinema, ego death and the shrinking horizon of the psychedelic experience.

The most relatable magic mushroom sequence in all of cinema may also be the most boring, and certainly the least psychedelic. In Judd Apatow's *Knocked Up*, Seth Rogen's bedraggled father-to-be and his buddy, played by Paul Rudd, escape to Las Vegas for a by-the-numbers guys' weekend, which includes the ritual gobbling of a few caps of psilocybin. Cue the usual, sub-*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* rendering of the psychedelic experience, including Rogen freaking out at the intensity and surrealism of a Cirque du Soleil performance.

The perceptive bit comes a little later, when the two dudes, tripping in their hotel, assemble a dais of their room's different chairs. "The short one's gawking at me," Rogen blathers, still gripped by his bad trip. "And the short one's being very droll. I don't like them." And then the kicker: "It's weird that chairs even exist when you're not sitting on them." For his faults as cinema's most archly conservative chronicler of American slackerdom, Apatow does

have an ear for soused-up guy talk: whether in the bawdy poker game back-and-forth in *The 40 Year-Old Virgin* or the zonked out, weed-and-pills riffing of the recent *The King of Staten Island*. The dialogue feels faithful to the wooly, half-formed revelations of a moderate-dose psychedelic experience. Or rather, a certain strain of psychedelic experience.

Across their history – from ancient Eleusinian rituals to indigenous ceremonies, to strobe-lit 'acid tests', open-air musical festivals and contemporary clinical trials – psychedelics have catalysed a range of experiences, from the transcendent to the miserable to the utterly banal. Yet one common feeling returns: 'Ego death'. It's a feeling of oneness and depersonalisation, a loss of the self, which LSD pioneers Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzer and Richard Alpert describe in 'The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead', as "complete transcendence – beyond words, beyond space-time, beyond self." These feelings, which have corollaries in Tibetan Buddhism and Jungian psychology, are considered by many to be the point of psychedelics.

To speak directly: I once found myself, mind sufficiently tweaked, outside of myself, my body and thoughts, enmeshed in a complex geometric latticework which I was simultaneously a part of and outside of, my subjectivity sundered. And in that instant I intuitively comprehended Hegel's notion of pure, unmediated Being. And then, in that same instant, that knowledge exploded back into this intricate web of all knowledge and feeling which was shimmering like golden gossamer. I felt like nothing at all, and in that way felt so free, and all of a sudden, all my priorities, long disorganised by the rigours of daily life, snapped into focus as sunrise bled over the city and the honeyed strains of an extended Allman Brothers jam drifted out from the high-power headphones on a gaming headset. What I felt in that instant is what people are talking about when they talk about ego death.

The trip depicted in *Knocked Up* has little to do with such a profound loss of self. It's more reflective of a moderate-dose high, the kind where you can still more-or-less go out and do things in the regular world, the kind that drives the sort of "I Went to Endless Shrimp at Red Lobster… On Acid!" wannabe-gonzo journalism that stands as the bastardised legacy of an author like Hunter S Thompson, whose drugged-up insights were unique in that they proved legitimately insightful. Such trips are not intended to be revelatory, but rather 'fun'. And that's fine.

Fun is fun! But the approach reveals a certain solipsism that has come to predominate the psychedelic experience. Inanimate objects are invested with sinister personalities, conventional notions of object permanence are meaningless. It's like that style of exhausting stand-up comedy where the would-be funnyman makes zero-calorie cracks like: "What are these?! Pants?! What are pants?! Just some fabric on my legs for when I'm walking around?! Like, what the fuck?" The whole world seems like a ludicrous conjuration of the expanding mind.

Cinema does offer images of psychedelia's productively dissolving effect on the self, albeit in non-psychedelic guises. Think of Paul Thomas Anderson's *Phantom Thread*, in which the A-type dressmaker Reynolds Woodcock (Daniel Day-Lewis) enters into an intensely romantic *pas de deux* with his lover Alma (Vicky Krieps), in which he knowingly

"Muttering his way through his comedown, Rogen's character shakes his head at a hotel room TV blasting the Steve Martin family comedy *Cheaper by the Dozen*."

consumes toxic mushrooms she prepares, takes sick, and wallows in the doting comfort she provides. Released the same year, Sofia Coppola's Civil War psychodrama *The Beguiled* – in which an injured Union soldier (Colin Farrell) waylaid in a girls' school in Confederate Territory, and eventually murdered with a meal of poisonous mushrooms – with *Phantom Thread* feels superficially of a piece, in terms of depicting mushrooms as a vector of feminised vengeance and control. (Sylvia Plath had previously foraged such ground, drawing a comparison between meagre-but-multiplying mushrooms and mid-century American women.)

In Anderson's film, the fungal bane serves as a metaphor for the psychedelic effects of psilocybin. It comes complete with hallucinatory revels (of Reynolds' long-dead mother) and, more importantly, the dissolution of egocentrism, as the commanding workaholic and relentless prick Reynolds cedes control, and puts his life in the caring hands of another. Ari Aster's 2019 folk horror *Midsommar* treads similar territory, albeit with recourse to actual mind-expanding compounds. There, Florence Pugh's grieving Dani finds solace in the ancient, psychedelically-shaded ceremonies of a remote Scandinavian village. Where her gawking, touristy friends gobble down magic mushrooms to amplify the weirdness of a foreign solstice festival (much to their own peril), Dani finds something deeper: a way of dealing with her profound grief.

That same milieu has not exactly been generous in depicting the psychedelic experience. The hippie exploitation films of the late 1960s and early '70s, from Roger Corman's *The Trip* to cheesier fare like the Manson Family-inspired *I Drink Your Blood*, tend to pander to parental fears about the deleterious, mind-wrecking profile of LSD specifically. Magic mushrooms were largely absent from this hysteria, likely a result of being perceived as being more 'natural' (compared to LSD, synthesised as it is from a putrid rye fungus) and its role in indigenous religious rituals (psilocybin use having been widely popularized by a 1957 *Life* magazine article, in which author R Gordon Wasson tripped as part of a Mazatec ceremony in Mexico).

A notable exception: Donald Cammell and Nicolas Roeg's 1970 film *Performance*, in which an on-the-lam London mobster (James Fox) undergoes a radical change under the influence of a psychedelic mushroom, his identity eventually collapsing into that of his lippy, libertine rockstar-landlord Turner (Mick Jagger). *Performance* works because it faithfully replicates the psychedelic experience – the synesthetic collision of the music and image, the half-baked Eastern mysticism, the elliptical and hypnotising editing rhythms, the sensuousness and confusion of it all – without collapsing into the hysteria and stock camera tricks that mark so many of the hippie-era exploitation flicks.

Knocked Up's characters arrive, by way of their Sin City psychedelic interlude, at slightly expanded notions of self. Muttering his way through his comedown, Rogen's character shakes his head at a hotel room TV blasting the Steve Martin family comedy *Cheaper by the Dozen*. "This guy has twelve kids," he blathers. "That's not funny. This is sick, this is a sick movie. That's a lot of responsibility to be joking about. That's not funny." In this instant, Rogen's man-child accepts the onus of his own impending fatherhood. It's the sort of low-key realisation that feels far away from the expanded horizon of possibility insinuated by the 1960s psychedelic subculture, or by the mind-exploding revelations of something like *Performance*. It's more consistent with the current revival in psychedelics as something more like medicine, soon to be rolled into a traditional, corporatised, pharmacological model. Solipsism recedes, the ego deflates a bit, only to be reabsorbed by a system of paternity, responsibility and the woefully square world of adulthood. The self is not transcended, just improved. It's the psychedelic equivalent of 'Chicken Soup for the Soul'.

However diminished its power, however circumscribed its potential by the larger cultural context, the mushroom remains – in its toxicity, in its possibility – a powerful metaphor, on screen and off, for the porousness of the lines between magic and horror, self and other, life and death, all of us like spores conjoined in some invisible mycelium, teeming just beneath the loam

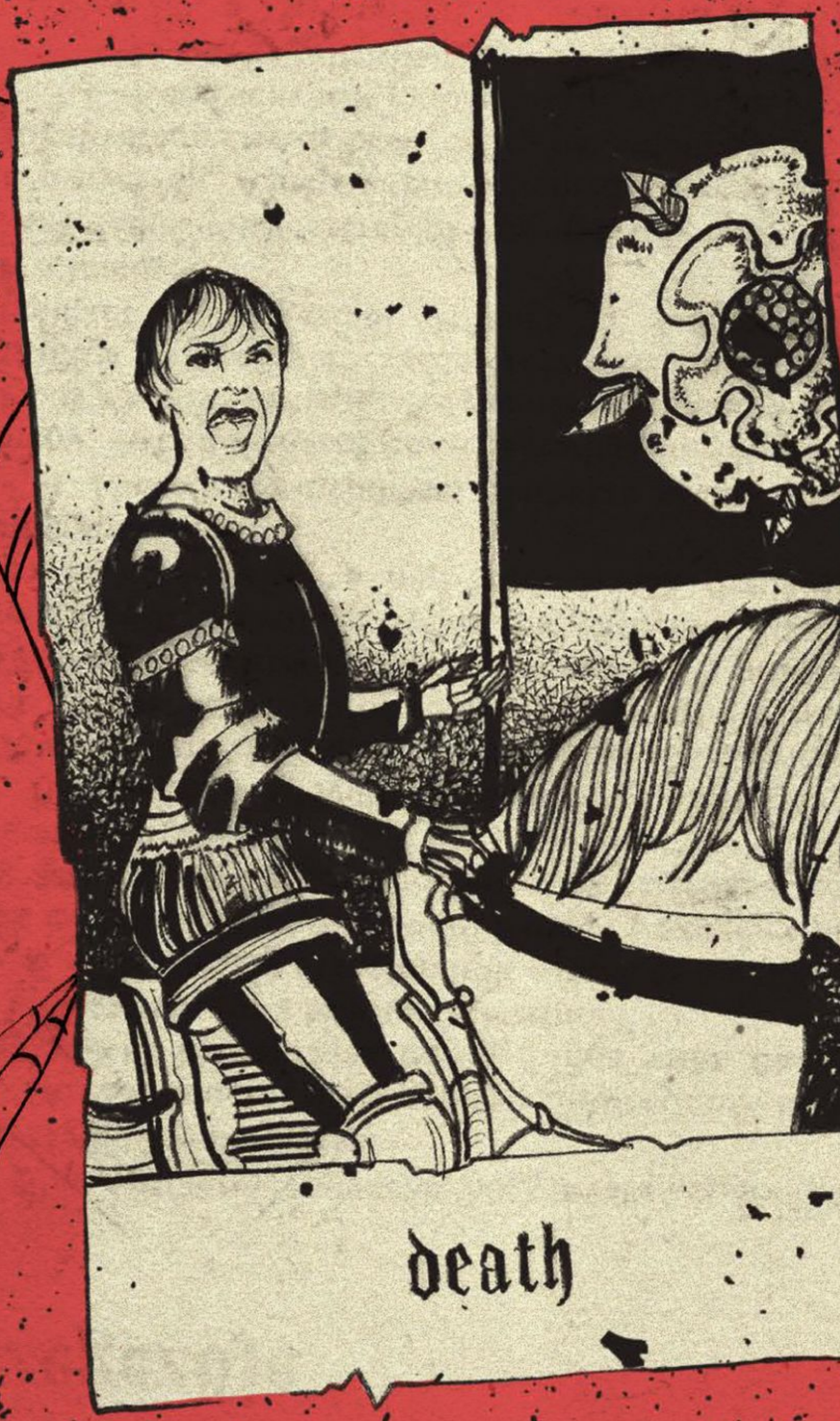
WRITER'S ROOM #2: LUCILE HADZIHALILOVIC WRITING *INNOCENCE* (2004)

ILLUSTRATION BY MIRANDA HARRIS

strength

the high priestess

the empress



death

WORDS AND INTERVIEW BY ANTON BITEL ILLUSTRATION BY SOFHIE MO

THE 1001ST WOMAN IN HORROR

Alexandra Heller-Nicholas exhumes genre's buried gender.

"I grew up believing that horror was a boys' club. Of course, in many ways it still is – both in the industry and in terms of the fandom. I know for myself and many other women, Carol J Clover's [1992] book 'Men, Women and Chainsaws' was a real lightning bolt moment when we realised there were ways into this genre for women spectators and creatives that weren't necessarily regressive or selling out 'team woman'. It was hugely liberating, and this book in large part seeks to continue that sense of liberation."

This is Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, contextualising the gender-corrective approach to genre cinema in her latest book '1000 Women in Horror 1895-2018'. She also, with typical modesty, positions herself and her work as merely the latest addition to a long tradition: just another woman in horror, among many whose strength and solidarity come in part from their numbers. Though her book redresses the lack of attention and recognition given to women

working as directors, writers, actors and crew since horror cinema's earliest years, Heller-Nicholas herself will likely be a familiar name to anyone with even a passing interest in genre. She is the voice of a thousand Blu-ray commentaries, the doyenne of DVD essays, an academic, a critic, a film historian, an editor, a broadcaster, a programmer for Fantastic Fest in Texas, and a member of the advisory board for the Miskatonic Institute of Horror Studies.

She is the author of monographs on *Suspiria*, *Ms. 45* and *The Hitcher*, she has also co-edited collections of essays on filmmaking couple Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani, and Peter Strickland, and has written book including 'Rape-Revenge Films' (2011), 'Found Footage Horror Films' (2014), 'Masks in Horror Cinema' (2019), and 'The Giallo Canvas: Art, Excess and Horror Cinema' (forthcoming). In other words, in the world of horror, Heller-Nicholas' name is legion, and her contributions to the discourse of dread are both wide and deep.

As well as being a prominent voice in horror criticism, Heller-Nicholas is both a woman and a feminist, which is key to her latest book's intersection of genre and gender. As she explains: "I find big survey projects like this – I've written four other book-length ones – tend to percolate over time. An origin point might be when I started consciously thinking about women's work in horror in terms of invisible labour, and that really feeds into work I'd already been doing on women's filmmaking more broadly, such as a large research project in 2016/2017 on Australian women's filmmaking of the 1980s and '90s, and co-editing a book on Elaine May. Horror, of course, was always my central passion, so it was really sparked by these two different research interests coming together."

The first thing you notice about this book is the monumental scale of its scope and ambition. Spread over 600 pages are 1000 entries, most offering painstakingly researched biographical and filmographical information on female subjects who range greatly in age, nationality and renown. So, entries opened at random yield dizzyingly eclectic results: on p195 there is contemporary Argentinian writer/director/producer Tamae Garateguy; p342 has '60s kaiju star Kumi Mizuno; and there is an extensive interview with Belgian critic, actor, writer/director and Basenji wrangler Axelle Carolyn spread over pp93-98. The order of these entries is strictly alphabetical, creating a new ABCs of death focused only on the women involved in horror's execution. Besides making it easy to dip into the book for reference, this organisational principle has a levelling effect, ensuring that equal status is granted to big-name celebrities and more obscure filmmakers. "I never wanted this to be a ranking, to hold some women's labour as being more significant than that of other, less well known women," says Heller-Nicholas. "And in practical terms, outside the introduction I

“I resist wholesale the idea of the ‘single male genius’ that screen culture has inherited from art history.”

do not intend this book to be read cover-to-cover – I like the idea of people using it as a reference, and accidentally stumbling across women they’d never heard of as they look up women they already know. For example, I thrill at the idea of a reader looking up Hollywood star Neve Campbell and, by sheer proximity, reading entries about indie actor and director Tara Cardinal, Australian negative-cutter Margaret Cardin, and Wendy Carlos, the transgender woman who created the extraordinary score to Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining*.”

A smaller set of entries is accompanied by lengthy interviews, although here too democratic criteria were applied, as Heller-Nicholas explains: “I wanted some to leap out of course, but it was very important to me to use this book as a space to listen to what emerging and indie creatives have to say as much as established figures in the field. There is an ambiguity to words like ‘greatness’ or ‘importance’ – to me, Lao filmmaker Mattie Do is just as ‘important’ to the genre as Cassandra Petersen (aka Elvira), even though the latter is obviously much closer to being a household name.”

“There are obviously more than 1000 women in horror,” Heller-Nicholas writes in the book’s introduction, where she also claims to be “still looking” for more female filmmakers, in what may be a life quest. At the end of the introduction, there is even a space expressly left for readers to add their own list of names. This is an open book, provisional, in no way pretending to be complete or exhaustive. “In a historiographical sense,” she muses, “it would not just be arrogant but also professional suicide to try and claim a list of 1000 women in horror who are the most ‘important’ or ‘significant’ – rather, I was more interested in painting a very broad picture that indicates just how large the scale needs to be when we start thinking of women in horror, both in front of and behind the camera.” She adds: “There is an ideological aspect to this: I resist wholesale the idea of the ‘single male genius’ that screen culture has inherited from art history, that grotesque idea of a pantheon of ‘great directors’ where – like art history – ‘greatness’ itself has been systemically rigged to render women, and all those who are not white, male, able-bodied, straight men, simultaneously invisible.”

So this book is a counter-history – a distaff riposte to the kind of patriarchal list-making that centres on male auteurs, and effaces everyone else. It is also just one piece of the armature in a new, more gender-inclusive canon under constant revision. “I very much want my book to be part of a conversation that started long before I began work on it and will continue into the future not just about women in horror, but women in the screen industries more broadly,” says Heller-Nicholas.

So the next time somebody suggests that horror is a boys-only club, or that women have no place in the genre, this encyclopaedic tome offers an overwhelming counterargument, putting a thousand bullets in the brain of the cockamamie commonplace that horror is a genre by and for men. And as the *coup de grâce*, there is, at the book’s end, a selected filmography of over 700 feature-length female-directed horror films. If only we acknowledge the contributions made to horror by all these women, pursue their films, spread the word and clamour for more, we will be halfway towards rewriting, even discarding, the horror canon, and replacing the male gaze with a much wider perspective on our darkest experiences and emotions

‘1000 Women in Horror, 1985-2018’ (Bearmanor Media) by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas is available now.

Revised (pink)
Revised (yellow)
directed by Spik
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8 CONTINUED:
Craig's eye. He reads the ad: "short-statured f
with unusually nimble and dexterous fingers need
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**IT IS THE AUTHOR'S INTENTION THAT MICHAEL VIEWS AND HEARS
RYONE IN THE WORLD (OTHER THAN AS ONE PERSON. THIS

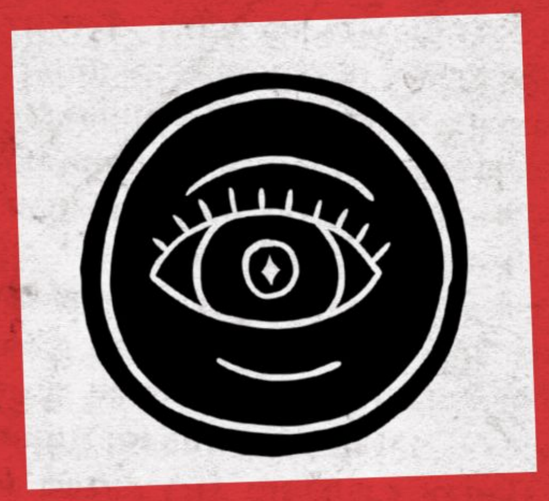
WORDS AND INTERVIEW BY DAVID JENKINS ILLUSTRATION BY OLIVER STAFFORD

IN DREAMS

A CONVERSATION WITH CHARLIE KAUFMAN

The garlanded, metaphysically-fixated screenwriter discusses his astonishing new movie puzzle box, *I'm Thinking of Ending Things.*

There are no useful maps or reference guides when it comes to exploring the treacherous terrain generated by the ruthlessly talented, LA-born screenwriter and director Charlie Kaufman. You just have to dash off in a direction of your choosing and see where it takes you. He entered the cinematic fray with awesome style, receiving an Oscar for his *Being John Malkovich* (1999) screenplay, and then produced something even more layered and surprising in its 2002 follow-up, *Adaptation.* With the Michel Gondry-directed *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* released in 2004, his name become synonymous with a kind of must-see indie event movie. And then came his move to directing, with 2008's melancholic disquisition on the difficulty of making meaningful art, S*ynecdoche, New York*, and 2015's emotional stop-motion opus on the nature of individuality, *Anomalisa*. Since then, he has written a madcap doorstop novel, 'Antkind', about a film critic who sees and then accidentally destroys



a newly-discovered masterpiece which runs at three months. His new directorial work is a loosey-goosey adaptation of Ian Reid's 2016 psychological horror novel, 'I'm Thinking of Ending Things', in which Jessie Buckley and Jesse Plemons take a long drive through a blizzard to visit his parents while reality frays at the seams around them.

LWLies*: I'm Thinking of Ending Things *opens with Jessie Buckley's character saying, 'I'm thinking of ending things,' and along with quite a lot in 'Antkind', you seem to have an interest in knowing where you stand with another person, in terms of your relationship to them.
Kaufman: Yes, I would say that's part of my life and part of my psyche. In both cases, it's also exploring the idea of rejection, which is akin to the idea of not knowing where you stand with someone. The idea that you're creating them to be this thing that you need them to be, and in so doing, nullifying them as an actual being. That is something that B. does in 'Antkind', and that happens in this movie as well.

The film is packed with verbal sparring, interruptions and people speaking over one another. How do you engineer that?
It's hard to talk about this type of thing without spoiling the story. I'd rather not give too much away. I just play with the notion of who's thinking what at any given moment. So if someone finishes somebody else's sentence, or knows what somebody else is going to say before they finish speaking, it helps with that conceit. How I do it? I don't know. I don't consciously think about it. I like writing dialogue and I try to find rhythms now and then. Somehow, you're occasionally able to simulate the way that people actually speak to each other in the real world. But this is something I'm always struggling with. This is my attempt at getting closer to that. Certainly there's a lot of interruption in the film, and people talk over other people in the real world.

What do you mean by rhythm? How do you gauge it?
I don't know. I feel it. I feel the timing. Maybe some of that goes back to my formative days. I have a background in theatre and acting and so I have that sense of how dialogue can be spoken. But I also think writing comedy is all about rhythm. If you go back to Ian Reid's book, it has a lot of comedy in it, and a lot of jokes, but for me it's all about the way it feels. It's an instinctive thing. Maybe my sense of what's funny is different to what it is in other people. They would have a different rhythm. But I have a rhythm in my head and when I'm writing something that's funny, I hear it and I feel it. I think it's all just instinct.

Do you feel that instinct has become sharper over the years?
It's hard to know. I know really look at myself when I was young because I'd just be mortified. I remember, though. I've had sense of what I think is funny since I was a teenager. I think I've gotten better at it. I'd hope so anyway. I have to believe I've gotten better at it. Although, every time I start a new project I'm back in the same dark spot that I am with every project. I don't know how to do it. I don't think I'm going to be able to do it. It's like a chasm. A yawning chasm that I encounter ahead of me that I don't know how to traverse.

How long does it take for you to realise that you can traverse it, and in style?
I wouldn't say I ever know that there's style. I don't think I know that for a fact, ever. The thing comes out and people say that there's style, and that makes me feel… okay. I don't know whether I would necessarily agree, though. There's a moment, usually, when I do something and I think I understand what it is. As in, what the process is. I don't know where it's going, and I don't often know how it's going to end, but I have a sense of what it is, and what it's going to feel like. With 'Antkind' I struggled for

well over a year before I landed on what I thought was the voice of the book. Then when I found it – and this is true of anything that I've worked on – it all starts to flow. That's how I know I've found it.

Can you describe the process of landing on that voice?

With *Adaptation.*, I was struggling to adapt that book [Susan Orlean's 'The Orchid Thief'], and I couldn't move. I couldn't make progress. And then when I thought of this idea of including the story of the writer trying to write it, things started to happen. Other fortuitous things came up, like I wanted to write this character who couldn't write a screenplay, but it's a very interior thing to write, and so I thought I needed someone for him to bounce things off of and talk to, and I thought it would be really funny – because it's such a cliché – to give him an identical twin brother who's a ne'er do well. This was silly. But it made me laugh as an idea. That became a major part of what the story lacked, because then Donald, the brother, ended up becoming pivotal to the movie, and that wasn't something I thought of as an idea – he was a device. It's almost like, the universe was saying yeah, this is the direction. Stuff started to fall into a place where it wasn't before.

I love the scene in this new film where Jessie Buckley's character recites the scathing Pauline Kael review of John Cassavetes'* A Woman Under the Influence*, particularly the voice she uses.

That's Jessie. She came to the production with that voice. And it was beautiful for me. It was funny and exactly what I was hoping for. The scene plays out on paper as an exercise in condescension and intimidation where he is forced to question his own opinions because he feels as if he's not smart enough to have the right opinion. As if he had his own thoughts about this movie from seeing it and then he came across Pauline Kael's review and felt like an idiot, and I wanted to play that out as a scene between these people. That was understood by both Jessie and Jesse. What Jessie also brought is that she started imitating Gena Rowlands in the car. Telling him to shut up and doing the raspberry and all that. Between takes, Jessie and Jesse were trapped in that car, and they're just chatting to one another. I had my headphones on which were connected to their mics, and I could hear their conversation, and they're talking about that movie, and she starts doing her impression of Gena Rowlands and it's really funny. I said to her, 'Well, this goes into the movie.' And it did, and it's one of my favourite things in there.

Do you find there is creative value on your dream life?

Yes, I'm very interested in dreams. I'm always trying to understand why my dreams are so compelling to me. What it is that's going on inside. They exist in a world of irrationality. Things change and there's no constancy and people become different people, and all those things resonate. It's like poetry. Everything I've done, everything I've ever written, has been in one way or another influenced by dreams. But it's

not specifically by a dream I've had, but by thinking about how dreams work and what they do and how they are effective, dramatically speaking. It's why I think there's a lot of surrealism in my stuff.

Do you see a natural crossover between dreams and movies?

Yes, of course. There's a trick to it, though, as the thing about dreams are they're very specific to you, so the imagery and symbolism and stuff like that doesn't have to be explained. If your mother is in your dream, you don't have to identify her as your mother to the audience, because you know who that is. Or if there's something that happens which refers to an event in your life, it'll resonate in a certain way that it might not for a general audience who hasn't been party to that experience. I think there are things that need to be thought about if you want to make a dream into a movie or a book. You have to think about, how do you actually do this, and not do it in a ham-fisted way. It's a wonderful tool.

So for you, dream form is more interesting than dream narrative?

The form and structure definitely, and the idea of what a symbol in a dream would be. For example, in *Synecdoche, New York*, I have a house that burns continually, and somebody buys the house. And that's not a dream that I've had, but it's an idea that seems like it could be in a dream. What I try to do there is to make it seem mundane. In a dream, it wouldn't be, 'Oh my god, the house is on fire, I can't buy it, oh my god!' It would be like, 'Yes, this house is on fire and I'm considering buying.' It's all very blasé. It was a dream image, and that movie is full of them.

You also appear to have an interest in road-side fast food outlets, which play key roles in* I'm Thinking of Ending Things *and 'Antkind'.

It's actually somewhat of a coincidence that both have these diners. I'd already written those sequences in 'Antkind' when I first discovered Ian Reid's book. And that was in his book, not in exactly the same form: it was a Dairy Queen, which is a chain of ice cream parlours. And they wouldn't give us permission to use their name so we invented one. I do like the idea of, in both cases, it's kind of similar in that they are these isolated things in the middle of nowhere. There's something dreamy about that to me. I like it. In both cases, it's the middle of the night and they're the only things lit up. Visually, I really like that image. I don't know if, if I think about it, if it's part of the culture here. I guess it is a thing. It's not a big part of my life. I don't go to fast food places.

In both cases there's a horrific aspect to them. They're presented as having the potential for terror.

I think that goes with the dreaminess of it. It is a dream image for me. And the whole idea that they're going to get ice cream in the middle of a blizzard seems very dreamy to me in the first place.

Do you feel happy when a project is over?

No. There's a sense of relief, because it always feels so treacherous to me. I don't know if I'm ever going to get through what I set out to do. I have done, so I should know that I will eventually figure out a way through, but each time I start out I just don't know. And there's usually a lot of stress, confusion and failure within the process. But when I get to the end of it, it's a relief. I don't know if I feel joy. I don't think I do. With 'Antkind' and *Being John Malkovich*, my first novel and my first screenplay, I feel like finishing each of those made me realise it's possible for me to write a novel and a screenplay. Just finishing them was enough. Before I started out writing, I didn't know I could write a novel. I didn't know if I could ever finish it. Then I finished it. And I feel like, okay, I can write a novel. For whatever that's worth. It encourages me to do another screenplay or another novel

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WRITER'S ROOM #3: CHERYL DUNYE WRITING *THE WATERMELON WOMAN* (1997)

ILLUSTRATION BY ADRIANA BELLET

CAT-EYE

Glasses

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A RAINBOW OF PASTEL TONES

A column about clothes and movies by Christina Newland

Threads

Illustration by Laurène Boglio

#16: Cat-Eye Glasses

"Men don't make passes at girls who wear glasses," says Marilyn Monroe sagely in 1953 comedy *How to Marry a Millionaire*. Monroe's character is, by her own admission, "blind as a bat," but in her desire to score a wealthy paramour, she stumbles, squints and pratfalls her way through the movie, convinced that her rather fetching diamante-rimmed cat-eye glasses will make her persona non grata. She meets a man on an airplane who tells her, "You look better with them on! The glasses – that particular type – gives your face a very interesting difference," and is transported with happiness and relief. Finally, she doesn't have to choose between attractiveness and her literal ability to see. Absurd as this may all play out to us now – both in the idea that Marilyn Monroe could ever look, in her words, "like an old maid," and in the idea that a woman in glasses is immediately ugly – in the mid-20th century, this was a much more commonly held belief.

At the time, the immediate cinematic association to women who wore glasses on screen were librarians and spinsters – Donna Reed wears them in *It's a Wonderful Life*, but only in a nightmare vision of her life as a librarian without a husband. In *Vertigo* (1958), the smart but unlucky-in-love Midge, played by Barbara Bel Geddes, dons a pair as a further sign of contrast with the mysterious object of male affection Kim Novak, who apparently has 20/20 vision. Notably, neither woman wears the cat-eye frames that Monroe wears; their more old-fashioned styles indicate that there should be nothing aspirational about them.

In the early 1940s, seeking to offer a more fashionable option to women who needed glasses, Italian-born designer and socialite Altina Schinasi invented a style of frames that were first known as the 'harlequin'. We now know them better as the 'cat eye', with thin upward sweeping rims and a deeply feminine look. In an early advertisement for the glasses, the copy says, "No longer is the girl who wears glasses doomed to look owlish, bookish, or just plain dull!"

And so the craze for the fashionable and hyper-feminine cat-eye, both in eyeglasses and eventually sunglasses, was born. On screen, the world's most desired women, from Grace Kelly to Audrey Hepburn, sported them, and they became heavily associated in retrospect to the period of their greatest popularity: the 1950s. The demure Su (Maggie Cheung) wears a pair in Wong Kar-wai's *In The Mood for Love*, but mostly, when we see cat-eyes in contemporary films that play with nostalgia, they're intended as a signifier of boldness.

You see them on girl-gangs like The Pink Ladies in *Grease* or the rebellious Drapes in John Waters' *Cry Baby*, both of whom are gum-smacking tough girls with a teenage pregnancy or two among them. They stand in stark contrast to the insipid, cardigan-wearing niceness of the 'square' girls, who don't have the mojo to pull off sharp-winged glasses anymore than they do a scarlet lipstick or a leather jacket. The same is true of ultimate bad-girl Catherine Deneuve in *The Hunger* (1983), as a seductive vampire who tricks and traps her lovers into eternal suffering – wearing sleek monochrome clothes with a pair of reflective silver-rimmed cat-eye sunglasses.

Fun and glamorous though the cat-eye style is, it is interesting that they've been given a contemporary sheen of rebellion when their origins were anything but. They were designed within the deeply patriarchal and image-conscious Eisenhower era, intended to be attractive on a woman, so that men would make passes at girls in glasses. Adding a postmodern outlook on them, where they become symbolic of 'bad girl' posturing and flirtatiousness, is cute but also twists the past.

The rigidly-enforced sexual innocence of the time was not something to be played with in the way it so often is in comic films like *Grease*; you can't get rid of a stain on your reputation like you take off a pair of sunglasses. Like so many of the iconic styles associated with the 1950s, a time endlessly romanticised in spite of its deep sexism and racism, it has a double life: the one it had in its own time, and the one that movies have created for it after the fact. Men do make passes at girls in cat-eye glasses; but the consequences for those girls are rarely taken seriously. Instead, everything is hidden behind a pair of vision-blocking shades

SHIRLEY

LWLIES 86

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Interview by DAVID JENKINS *Illustration by* RUMBIDZAI MARILYN SAVANHU

Sope Dìrísù

A decade of hard graft across stage, screen and TV has resulted in a bone-rattling lead turn in political horror, *His House*.

You'll have probably seen the actor Sope Dìrísù in something, as he's cropped up here, there and everywhere across the last decade. His extraordinary turn as Bol, an African refugee whose life gets even worse when he reaches a safehouse in the UK, is at the heart of the Sundance-lauded horror feature, *His House,* which is relased on Netflix 30 October.

LWLies: Has it been a hectic decade for you? And if so, has it been pleasurably hectic? Dìrísù: I don't know, I haven't had anything to compare it to, because I'm the only person in my family who's in the industry, so I don't have anyone close to me that I can look up to. I've made a lot of friends, but I wouldn't be able to tell you if it was particularly busy. I know that coming into it, everyone makes a big hoo-ha about how you're probably not going to work forever and you're going to have to supplement your income, but I've been really blessed in being able to basically go from job to job. There have definitely been gaps and you do get worried that you're never gonna work again, but I've never felt overwhelmed by the amount of work that I'm doing.

Do you recall the first time you ever acted in public? What was it and who did you play? The first time that I was supposed to act in public, and I got all the way to dress rehearsals, was meant to be as the star in the Nativity play at school.

When you say star do you mean a star or the star? I mean literally the star that guided the three wise men to the manger. I was just supposed to stand up in the hall with a foil star in a hula-hoop, and then walk across the stage. But I got appendicitis so I couldn't do it. I think my first memory of performing would definitely still be a school play. I played like one of the ensemble in *The Wizard of Oz*. That's when I must have been 12. But I suppose I really only got into acting in the first instance because I got into a new school, and I didn't really have any friends there and it was a way of sort of socialising. I was just going to throw myself into as many extra-curricular activities as possible. And acting was the one that stuck.

Were you aware how scary *His House* was going to be when you were making it? Sometimes when you're in it, you can't really see the wood for the trees. Because I feel the same thing about horror films. The last thriller that scared me was *What Lies Beneath*, the Harrison Ford film. The only reason it scared me is because I was like ten when I watched and I wasn't able to go to the toilet or the bathroom without parental supervision for about a week because I was worried that someone would be drowned in the bath when I got there. But I do struggle with horror films because I find some of the scares predictable, so it's really, really warming to hear that this film bangs in a different way.

With the PTSD aspect of your character, how did you go about building that traumatic history in your head? I suppose in terms of creating a character, when you look at human beings or even your own life, everything that happened to you before today forms who you are. So say like really crassly if you've been hit by a car, the way you cross the road is massively different to someone who hasn't. I think that it wasn't too much to hold a lot of his experiences in his head, and as I was breaking down the script to be like, 'Yeah, but he's been through a very particular experience so how would that affect his response to the people around him.' The notes on my script were really thorough. Sometimes I couldn't see what the actual lines were.

Through Bol, we see many different shades of fear. He's kind of fearful in different extremes and for different things. Is fear a tough emotion to deal with as an actor? I think fear is really hard because it's very difficult to predict how people are gonna respond when they're stressed or scared. When you're afraid, adrenaline floods your system. That's a very difficult sensation to replicate in an imagined circumstance. As an actor you're being like, 'Oh, I heard a noise in that corner,' I would just switch a light on or I would just go to sleep or I'd just leave the house – there are certain decisions that characters make that human beings outside of the situation would be like, 'I would never do that.' Which is why we're always screaming at the cinema screen, 'Don't go in there! Don't touch that!' I suppose there is a real headspace you need to get into in the character to justify a lot of the decisions. So I do think that channelling fear is difficult, for sure.

Did you have any contact with any real refugees or did you do any deep research? I wouldn't have been too keen on getting people to relive their trauma for our art. There are a lot of published articles and accounts of people who have made crossings or people who were held in detention centres, and I think we relied more on that. I'd also done a short film a few years ago with the director Stuart Gatt called *The Dead Sea* and that was a similar story about a Nigerian couple who had been living in Libya and, once Gaddafi had been toppled, it became very hostile to foreign nationals so they needed to get out. The story focuses on them in a detention camp and, because of the specificity of that story, we'd done a lot of research, and I was able to draw on the research we'd done for that film on this film. I see this as almost a progression of that story

His House

Directed by
REMI WEEKES
Starring
SOPE DÌRÍSÙ
WUNMI MOSAKU
MATT SMITH
Released
30 OCTOBER

4

ANTICIPATION.
Love Weekes' short film
Tickle Monster.

5

ENJOYMENT.
Creepy and disorienting haunted house film. Superlative horror.

5

IN RETROSPECT.
The trauma of survival, guilt and exile.

Bol Majur (Sope Dìrísù) walks, zombie-like with exhaustion, carrying his little girl Nyagak (Malaika Wakoli-Abigaba) down a dusty road in war-torn South Sudan. Then Bol, his wife Rial (Wunmi Mosaku) and Nyagak cram onto the back of a pick-up truck ("I'll protect you," Rial promises the girl). Last we see, the three aboard an overcrowded boat making the night crossing, until there is a bang, and suddenly everyone is in the water, including a terrified Nyagak, separated from the others and desperate to be saved.

Opening writer/director Remi Weekes' feature debut *His House*, this impressionistic sequence of events – an economic sketch of refugees' wrenching experiences – might appear as a flashback, but will turn out to be a nightmare which has Bol screaming in his sleep. It is a year since he and Rial lost Nyagak to the sea, and the asylum seekers are now moving into their assigned residence on a noisy council estate somewhere in England. That opening nightmare shows that Bol and Rial are still very much haunted by the trauma of their recent past – and soon their abiding loss and guilt and terror will assume the form of a 'night witch' (Javier Botet) which has followed them from Africa, along with an army of ghosts. Now, as they try to build themselves a new home, they find the spaces in its walls already occupied by manifestations of their most harrowing memories.

Where Bol initially tries to deny the very existence of the witch, and then attempts a violent confrontation, Rial forms a different relationship with it, rooted in dialogue and persuasion. After all, Rial and Bol are very different kinds of people: she bears the scarified markings of both the tribes at war in her country, as signs of adaptive compromise, and is quite capable of maintaining simultaneous allegiances to her old culture and the new one in which she finds herself; whereas he wants to forget his past entirely, and is quick to assimilate to his new environment by adopting local fashions and customs.

His House is an exceedingly well-told ghost story that comes with a particularly intense brand of haunting, as aggressive shape-shifting spirits do far more than merely go bump in the night, and as the dirty interiors of the house – which Bol slowly dismantles in his efforts to corner his conscience – readily transform into liquid expanses of guilt or primal African scenes. Yet at the same time this is an urgent allegory, as the Majurs' domestic disturbances crystallise the dislocations – all at once spatial, psychological and cultural – that form part of the furniture for those who have been forced to go far from home and to be 'reborn' in a new land. With the sort of emotional intelligence not seen since Jennifer Kent's 2014 film *The Babadook*, Weekes shows the spectres of the past not being dispelled so much as ultimately accommodated in this new home, as our two traumatised travellers learn to make their peace with a past that is here to stay. Along with Romola Garai's *Amulet,* also from 2020, *His House* forms a new, highly topical subgenre of British horror films focused sympathetically on refugees and the histories of hurt that are imported with them. **ANTON BITEL**

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BFI PLAYER

I'm Thinking of Ending Things

Directed by
CHARLIE KAUFMAN
Starring
JESSIE BUCKLEY
JESSE PLEMONS
DAVID THEWLIS
Released
4 SEPTEMBER

4

ANTICIPATION.
Kaufman! Buckley! Plemmons! So many great names!

4

ENJOYMENT.
No log line could ever do this film justice.

5

IN RETROSPECT.
A haunting highwire act that captures a feeling almost impossible to put into words.

While browsing a website for a local mental health facility recently, I was struck by an interesting sentence: "It is rare for someone to think or say 'I want to die'. More often, we hear, 'I wish I wasn't here any more,' or, 'I can't carry on'." Or perhaps, "I'm thinking of ending things." These euphemisms paper over the bigger, scarier sentiment. Is it truly a desire not to die, or simply a reticence to voice such an ugly, taboo sentiment? This brand of philosophy is a topic on which I consider myself something of an expert: I've contemplated "ending things" more times than I care to remember. I can shrug it off like the punchline of a bad joke. More and more it feels like everything might be the punchline of a bad joke.

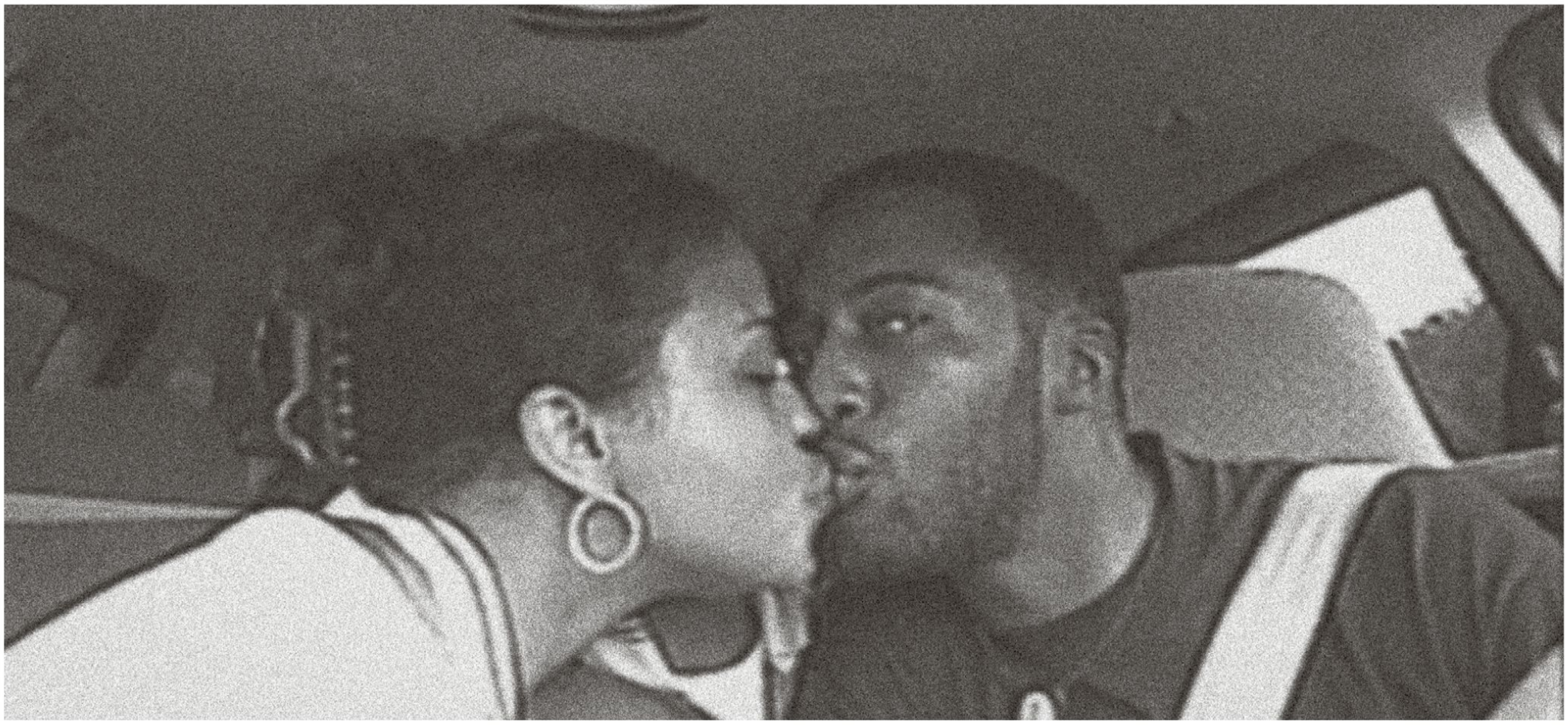
"I'm thinking of ending things" is what an unnamed young woman (Jessie Buckley) contemplates as she drives to the countryside with her boyfriend Jake (Jesse Plemons) to meet his parents (David Thewlis and Toni Collette) for the first time. Their relationship is fairly fresh – or is it? She can't quite recall. Yet she is restless, and doesn't really see a future with him. Or a present. Or a past. And the thought of finality, once it arrives, won't leave her be.

Obsession is a running theme in Charlie Kaufman's work, from his 1999 debut screenplay for *Being John Malkovich* right through to 2015's written-and-co-directed *Anomalisa*. Though his latest film is based on the 2016 novel of the same name by Canadian author Iain Reid (and viewers will probably benefit from familiarising themselves with the source material) it feels as much a part of his frantic, fatalistic worlds as everything that has preceded it.

In one remarkable scene, Buckley recites excerpts of Pauline Kael's scathing review of John Cassavetes' *A Woman Under the Influence* as if it's her own stream of consciousness. The decision to reference one of the most famous films about a woman mentally unravelling within a film ostensibly about a woman mentally unravelling appears at first a wry Kaufmanism, but the more one thinks about it – in light of what preceded it and what comes after – the stranger it all becomes.

Plus ça change for Kaufman, but while Kael took issue with Cassavetes' "romanticised conception of insanity," there's very little lovestruck about his glacial take on the splintering psyche, and all the garish floral wallpaper and doddering, dementing parents with an air of quiet dread about them only add to the sense of psychological displacement. By the time the film reaches its stunning, baffling conclusion, it's impossible to tell what's up or down or left or right any more.

Buckley and Plemons are predictably compelling (both continuing to build fascinating bodies of diverse, challenging work), and Thewlis delivers the best line-reading of the year while describing the temperature during his brief appearance. For the life of me, I can't tell you what the hell happened, but I can tell you this: Kaufman's innate ability to translate the innermost feelings of psychosis and anxiety onto the screen is unparalleled. His work is often described as surreal, or unusual, but for those who have indeed experienced the dissociative agony of "thinking of ending things", it's as if someone is reaching through the screen and squeezing your hand. Sometimes it doesn't matter that you don't have all the answers – it's enough to know someone's paying attention. **HANNAH WOODHEAD**



Time

Directed by
GARRETT BRADLEY
Starring
FOX RICH
ROB RICH
Released
9 OCTOBER

4

ANTICIPATION.
Won plaudits at Sundance, and definitely intrigued by the pithiness of that title.

4

ENJOYMENT.
A documentary that flows perfectly without ever cleaving to an obvious dramatic schema.

4

IN RETROSPECT.
The soundtrack cloys in the later stretches, but there's a musicality to the film that keeps things emotional.

Does a person experience time, or does one simply travel through it as if it's some kind of elongated underground tunnel through the earth? Fox Rich's tunnel allows for a modicum of speed and is beset with dramatic twists and turns. The tunnel of her husband Rob, meanwhile, is a monotonous straight line that must be passed through with inconvenient lethargy. Back in 1997, the pair ran a hip-hop clothing store in Shreveport, Louisiana that had fallen on hard times. Their emergency scheme to financially underwrite the business involved an armed robbery: her keeping the engine running outside; him carrying out the deed. They were both caught and received custodial sentences: her 19 years (of which she served three); him an unnecessarily draconian 65 years without parole.

It's a brutal illustration of the American prison industrial complex and how justice often takes the form of retribution and example-setting when it comes to people of colour. Cherishing freedom with near-rhapsodic intensity, Fox then dedicated her life to having her husband's sentence commuted. She wanted that long, straight, slow tunnel to break out into the light much sooner that the law would allow for. She documented her efforts on camcorder, and that's where director Garrett Bradley comes in. The title of her film, *Time,* alludes to the slang term for a prison sentence, but also to life's most fragile resource. In just 81 minutes, she compresses 18 lost years into which Fox employs her overflowing stores of moxie to do everything in her modest power to be able to recreate a simple, filmed image of herself and her husband, sitting in the front of their car, smiling and kissing. Meanwhile, she is raising six children and making sure they are fully aware of what she's fighting for and how they might be able to assist in the future. This remarkable film comprises snatched domestic scenes, often tragicomic, in which Fox does not allow a minute of her precious time to slip away from her unused. When she's not corralling her sweet boys, she holding crowds rapt at a public address, or just making calls to anyone and everyone, trying to locate the tiny chink in the armour of this daunting bureaucracy of mass incarceration.

Bradley toys with chronology and flits back and forth in time, constantly reminding the viewer, via Fox's change in physical appearance, just how long 18 years is. She also emphasises connections through montage, as Fox makes the same emotive and articulate plea at speaking engagements and she'll appear noticeably older in some more than others. The evocative use of the tinkling, fragile piano music by Etheopian "singing nun" Emahoy Tsegué-Maryam Guèbrou is a masterstroke of context, linking these black-and-white images to some bygone era, making the film feel like the lost reels of a silent classic. There's even a sense that the film exists to fill in the blanks for Rob – these captured images offering a remembrance of lost time. If there's one criticism, it's that later in the film, when Fox gravitates ever closer to her objective, the modern score by Jamieson Shaw and Edwin Montgomery perhaps works the heartstrings a little too hard and heavy. Mostly, though, this is a staggering portrait of resilience against insurmountable odds. **DAVID JENKINS**

Eternal Beauty

Directed by
CRAIG ROBERTS
Starring
SALLY HAWKINS
DAVID THEWLIS
ALICE LOWE
Released
2 OCTOBER

3

ANTICIPATION.
A London Film Festival number that completely passed me by.

3

ENJOYMENT.
Sally Hawkins' humour and grace lifts the film wonderfully.

3

IN RETROSPECT.
Low on originality, big on charm.

The characters in Craig Roberts' second directorial feature *Eternal Beauty* have a penchant for saying, "I'm in my oils." To be in one's "oils", it appears, is to be at your best, resting comfortably in surroundings that nourish and soothe. A happy place, in other words. The phrase even acts as the title of a painting that appears in various locations throughout the film – yet its insistent repetition soon becomes more of a diktat than a truth.

The search for such a state of being is at the heart of this film. The path to happiness for Jane (Sally Hawkins), a paranoid schizophrenic, seems tricky on the surface, but as her conceited family members try to convince her of their own "oils" the relativity and complexities of happiness themselves become all the more apparent. Flashbacks to Jane as a young woman (a disappointingly brief appearance from Morfydd Clark) detail the cause and consequences of her first mental breakdown while, moving forwards, she learns to adapt to her family's unwillingness to understand her. This dynamic is crystallised in an early scene in which Jane wraps her own Christmas presents for her bewildered family to give to her before presenting them with the receipts for reimbursement.

Hawkins is excellent, her performance delicately skittish, softly-spoken and often very funny. It is evident that this character, based on someone close to the director according to interviews, has been constructed with the tenderest care and insight, shaped by fine details and idiosyncrasies. Her sisters, played with moxie and sensitivity by Billie Piper and Alice Lowe, have only glimpses of hidden depth. They fall into their roles more as caricatures than developed, engaging additions to a narrative which feels somewhat wasteful. Perhaps this is indicative of the world Jane occupies – her mental illness is framed as the thing that makes her distinctly powerful. Yet as her siblings are given very little to do, they inevitably fall too flat. Plotlines are also concerned primarily with these women's relationships with men and little else – further evidence of unimaginative character development.

Even the film's vibrant styling and set design lacks a punch, its *Twin Peaks* meets Wes Anderson lovechild aesthetic a little tired and lacking in originality. These influences are clear in the monochromatic living spaces and kitschy diner setting, with scenes clinically organised to house the scatterings of deadpan dialogue. Still, the visual familiarity allows for moments of charm and effectively allows us access to Jane's world of quirks and off-kilter interactions. Her modes of expression and her understanding of environment make more sense than her family's self-deceptive and world-weary approach. Roberts steers clear of wallowing in pity; Jane's pure heart and insistence on kindness become the grounding morals of the film.

A cutely delivered finale brings the film to a satisfying close, but sticking this landing feels a little unmerited after a lacklustre build-up. Where the film works best is in its portrayal of Jane reckoning with her life as a young woman and learning to let go of past anguish. Roberts' handling of mental health is sensitive but also matter-of-fact – his film locates an level of intelligence that elevates the material.

CAITLIN QUINLAN

Kajillionaire

Directed by
MIRANDA JULY
Starring
EVAN RACHEL WOOD
RICHARD JENKINS
DEBRA WINGER
Released
8 OCTOBER

4

ANTICIPATION.
July's third feature has been a long time coming.

4

ENJOYMENT.
And it's worth the wait for this silly, sweet delight.

4

IN RETROSPECT.
A joyful burst of lite anarchy about parents, post, and love against the odds.

It's been 15 years since Miranda July's debut feature, *Me and You and Everyone We Know,* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and nine since her follow-up film, *The Future,* did the same thing. This means fans of her work have hat to wait a long time for another hearty dose of her patented offbeat humour. It's not as though July hasn't been busy, though. She's turned her considerable talent and imagination to a variety of other projects, including performance art, novel writing, shopkeeping and a wonderful acting turn in Josephine Decker's *Madeline's Madeline.* Still, it's a delight to have July back behind the camera, especially with a project as tender and funny as this one, which centres on an unconventional family of grifters living in Los Angeles.

Robert (Richard Jenkins), Therese (Debra Winger) and their awkward 26-year-old daughter Old Dolio (Evan Rachel Wood) Doyle reside in the dilapidated office of a bubble factory where, each day, they are forced to quell a comical leak of pink bubbles, all the while attempting to avoid their landlord, to whom they owe three months' back rent. The family's primary source of income is sneakily stealing mail from a local post office, but they obsess over mail-in competitions too. When Old Dolio wins a sweepstake for a trip to New York, they come up with another grift which takes the form of an insurance scam. This, inadvertently, introduces them to Melanie (Gina Rodrigeuz), a peppy, infinitely more well-adjusted young woman who is intrigued by this bizarre family and their harebrained schemes.

Kajillionaire undoubtedly belongs to Wood, who performs Keaton-esque feats of physical comedy and lowers her voice several octaves to become the shy, distrustful Old Dolio, who is instantly suspicious of Melanie and irritated with her parents for bringing a new player into their tight-knit fold. Yet it's through Melanie that Old Dolio is finally able to step outside of the world created for her by her parents and realise all she's missed out on while playing the Oliver Twist to their twin Fagins. Melanie is the first person to treat her with kindness, and although Old Dolio finds old habits hard to shake, she sees a flicker of light at the end of the tunnel.

It feels passé to refer to the quirkiness of July's work (though it warrants a chuckle that Old Dolio's initials are ODD), so let's instead concentrate on the other riches in this charming film: the sense of acute loneliness that haunts sunny Los Angeles; the inevitability of being disappointed by your parents; and the peculiar rituals we perform while trying to establish our own identity.

July's fascination with performance plays into the plot, as characters try on roles for themselves, attempting to eke out their place not only within familial units but the wider world. For oddballs and misfits with disagreeable relatives, *Kajillionaire* is a keenly-observed examination of such relationships that has much in common with July's past work. But it's also a sweet love story between two initially mismatched individuals who find peace with each other – and proves that there's no telling what July will do next.

HANNAH WOODHEAD

Interview by HANNAH WOODHEAD *Illustration by* RUMBIDZAI MARILYN SAVANHU

Miranda July

Breaking into the local post office was deep research for the artworld multi-hypenate's supurb new film, *Kajillionaire*.

Good things supposedly come to those who wait, and Miranda July's third feature film is proof of that. In the nine years since she directed *The Future*, July has been keeping extremely busy. Performance art, a novel, an app, a charity shop run out of Selfridges – her productivity (not to mention her versatility) knows no bounds, but even she was surprised when the kernel of an idea for a heist movie popped into her head. The result is *Kajillionaire*, a sweet, delightfully offbeat story of love, loss and larceny in Los Angeles.

LWLies: You've been concentrating on other art forms for a while now, so how did you land on the idea for *Kajillionaire*? July: The last big project I worked on was a novel which didn't have a heist plot but did have a lot of reveals and twists and turns, and I knew I wanted to use those muscles for a movie. But my ideas come from my unconscious. I don't think, 'I want to write about the issue of...' It's not like that, it's more mysterious. I wrote two scripts kind of quickly that I put aside which were kind of false starts before *Kajillionaire* – and I'm saying that so that it's less annoying when I say that it came to me all at once one morning fairly fully-formed. So it took a year, but then it came all at once, and I was wondering, 'Why a heist movie?' as I was typing it. But when I got to the end and read it back, I was kinda punched in the gut. I never would have chosen to write about these icky family betrayals if I'd been conscious that that's what I was doing. I think maybe the way it works for the audience is similar, that you're kind of holding on to this idea of a mad-cap heist. I mean, there is a heist, but it's more of an emotional heist movie in the end.

There's a throughline in your work about how people connect with each other, specifically romantically and as family. What is it about these sorts of relationships that fascinates you? I think it's not that connecting that interests me as much as the unique ways that people make it harder for themselves, because that's where everyone's creative ingenuity comes in – all the little self-sabotaging things that we do. That's what interests me. To use a metaphor, it's not the sort of kiss at the end, but all the ways that people make it almost impossible to get to that kiss.

Is the heist genre one that you had any interest in before the idea came to you? It's not that I'm a heist movie fan, although I did grow up watching a lot of the *Mission: Impossible* TV show, so that's all very mother tongue to me, reversals and little twists and the satisfaction of a good scam, although all the *Kajillionaire* scams are terrible. I just love intricacies and I love the ways that people can be artists without being artists – they're acting, they're doing these performances, these kind of sleight-of-hands, they're dressing up in costumes. That's often the case in my movies, even the people who aren't artists are also someway making something. And then also I should give a little shout-out to my punk feminist, '90s roots in which the scam was constant. I can't pretend I haven't done some of these scams in my deep, deep past. There was this thing of always looking for an opportunity to make a buck in some way.

You've got to give me an example! One that I was trying to get into the movie was, I remember in New York City doing this once – going into a dry cleaner and saying, 'I think I left my sweater here, it was a black cardigan,' It kind of works with a lot of lost-and-founds. Either there's nothing like what you described there and you just leave, or there's something like that and you take it. It's horrible!

You mentioned growing up on *Mission: Impossible* – *Kajillionaire*'s opening sequence reminds me of watching Tom Cruise dangling on a rope, and the heist scene from *The Thomas Crown Affair*. The first scene I wrote was not that scene, but I remember there was a point in editing where, for a little while, it was moved a little later in the movie, but it was supposed to be the opening and I was so glad when it went back to that. There's a PO Box right by my studio. So I went there with a choreographer friend and I just did everything you could possibly do to get into the building. It was funny because it's a busy enough corner that more than one person texted me later that day saying, 'I saw you falling out of the post office, what was going on there?' and I was like, 'Jesus! Did all of LA drive past me in that moment?'

As someone who does work across so many different mediums, what's your favourite thing about making films? It's the one that I wanted to do when I was a teenager. This to me is like when a kid dreams of being an astronaut, and then ends up on the moon. That kid is probably like, 'I can't believe I'm here on the moon!' That's how I feel on set, on the first day, even though it's such hard work and I'm more used to it, it still has this child-like dream quality to it. And I love seeing the things people make in their departments, like the different costumes and props and special effects. I'm giddy watching them. Then film is such a universal language, it's so inclusive. There's a whole lot of people who will never read my books, but movies are the most welcoming, and so it's great I can do all this weird stuff and people will always kind of be somewhat friendly. Even the scariest movie, you can't hide the fact that you're inviting people in. If you're not, you wouldn't have made a film

Max Richter's Sleep

Directed by
NATALIE JOHNS
Starring
MAX RICHTER
YULIA MAHR
Released
11 SEPTEMBER

3

ANTICIPATION.
The prospect of a documentary about an album designed to put people to sleep won't make everybody purr.

4

ENJOYMENT.
It's easy to drop in and out of this doc yet that feels intentional given the subject matter, while the fascinating insights never let up.

4

IN RETROSPECT.
A unique film about the healing nature of song.

Max Richter's work, even at its most expansive, is inward-looking and unafraid to operate from a place of vulnerability. This was personified by the influential contemporary classical composer's 2015 record 'Sleep', an eight-hour concept album which is built around various tonal shifts that synch to the frequencies on which the human brain operates while we sleep.

Richter even conferred with neuroscientist David Eagleman to ensure his music could leave an impression on its listeners while they snoozed, with each of the Suites designed to be experienced while in both conscious and unconscious states. This documentary from director Nathalie Johns delves even deeper into the creation of 'Sleep' and its unique song cycle – it transports us to one of Richter's pioneering live shows in Los Angeles, where every concertgoer is given their own bed to experience the album as it's played in its entirety from dusk through to dawn.

At a time when the world appears to be teetering on the edge of calamity, swinging violently from one disastrous news event to the next, there's something cleansing and therapeutic about this film, particularly the way in which it prioritises the concept of taking time for yourself. Richter describes 'Sleep' as being a "quiet protest" designed to help people "step off the wheel and take stock." This does happen to conveniently mirror much of the philosophical questioning and interior thought that has been a direct result of the prolonged, hibernation-like Coronavirus lockdown.

Even though this film exists in a world before social distancing, it embraces the idea of moving away from the overly-complicated trappings of globalisation and creating a powerful prescience. Beyond this meta-commentary, it also works as a three-dimensional account of Richter's drive to radically alter the conventions of popular music, whether through how it's played live or recorded in the studio. "I don't want people to just listen to 'Sleep', I want them to experience it like a landscape. They should be inside of it," the musician, who abides by a near-scientific attention to detail, powerfully explains at one point.

One obvious weakness of the film is the over-used reflections from people in the LA crowd, which can sometimes veer into indulgent territory. Another criticism, perhaps, is that beyond insisting this experience is overwhelmingly meditative, there doesn't seem to be much hunger to probe the idea that Richter's concept could in fact exacerbate our fears of losing control of our bodies, or even be seen by some as a gimmick.

Yet in a world where so many of us are happy to be led and defined by technology, the way this film explores the idea of how control can be channelled into something more positive, is fascinating. Even though live shows might be off the cards until 2021, Johns' film, which has an hallucinatory feel to its cinematography and pacing, suggests Richter may have unearthed a new dawn for communal, music-led experiences. The filmmaker and her subject are acutely aware that there's never been a better time to switch off and be still. **THOMAS HOBBS**

Liberté

Directed by
ALBERT SERRA
Starring
HELMUT BERGER
MARC SUSINI
ILIANA ZABETH
Released
SEPTEMBER TBC

4

ANTICIPATION.
Bombed at Cannes, but that's its own strange endorsement.

4

ENJOYMENT.
Beguiling treatise on voyeurism and revolution. More to it than just costumed dogging.

4

IN RETROSPECT.
An exceptional, completely unique film, though like public orgies, definitely not for everyone.

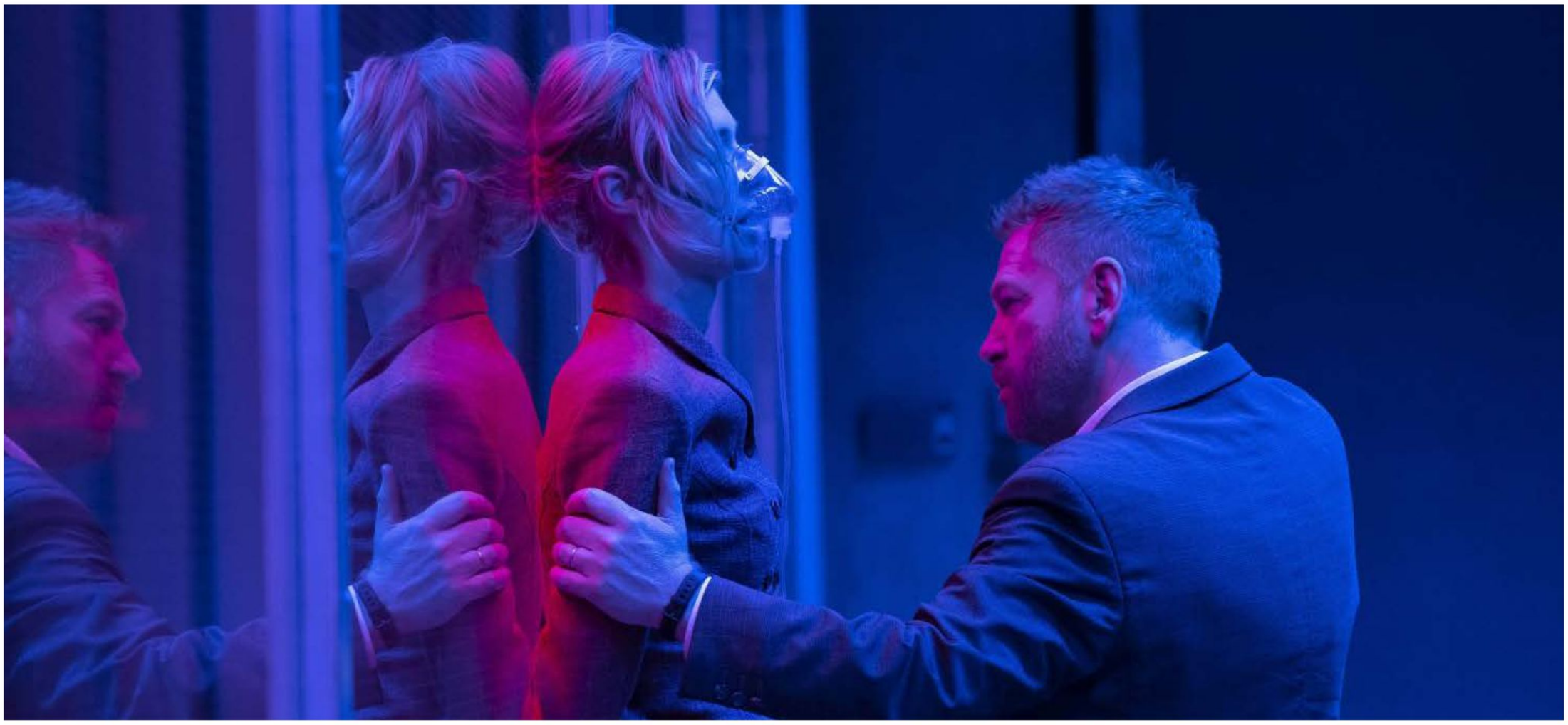
Describing a film that, from the outset, doesn't appear to be a comedy, as a comedy, is a method sometimes used by critics as a form of deflection. Comedy tends to be primal and instinctual, maybe even a bit throwaway, and so to use it as a descriptor in this way serves to eliminate both a film's complexities and your own need to take that film at its purported face value. To give an example, in 1997, at a screening of William Friedkin's *The Exorcist*, most of the patrons chose to laugh their way through some of the film's most gruelling sequences, using comedy as a way to offset the potential for trauma.

Albert Serra's *Liberté* was widely lambasted when it screened at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival for its extended duration and lack of a storyline, as it presented a fleshy coterie of bewigged 18th-century French dandies skulking around a moonlit woodland clearing while engaging in all manner of erotic tomfoolery. Having been ejected from the court of King Louis XVI for their foul predilections, this clandestine collective decide instead to enact their own private revolution – just ahead of the one on the horizon that resulted in the king's sudden head loss via guillotine. About an hour in, it seems clear that Serra is joking with his audience, placing us in the uncomfortable position of being unwilling voyeurs (among others on screen with frilly blousons and handy telescopes) to these miniature episodes of unbridled libertinism.

But then maybe it's not so uncomfortable, as isn't this what film watching is all about? That is, being asked to observe people from a safe distance while they synthesise and offload naked emotions for the camera. Is all cinemagoing not just tacit participation in a scrubland orgy? If you think about it, that's pretty funny. There's a sequence in which one nobleman is being repeatedly caned on his derriere while another man watches excitedly, and it goes on for so long that you pass through the looking glass of pure horror and into the realms of absurdist comedy. Each scream translates as an equal fusion of pleasure and pain. But which side to fall on?

Liberté is not a comedy that evokes belly laughter, but one that elicits coiled amusement at the idea of the microdramas that arise from such a situation. Serra managed a similar tonal balancing act in his previous film, *The Death of Louis XIV*, in which it was hard not to titter as fussbudget retainers attempt to prolong the life of a desiccating regent played with deadpan aplomb by Jean-Pierre Léaud. Here though, roles are enforced, couplings are suggested and then suddenly reneged upon, complete sexual equality appears to be the rules of the game, though clear class structures remain. It's a fascinating, unique and affirmative film about the revolutionary act of self-expression, and the connection between backroom intellectual inquiry and broad public thinking. Serra and DoP Artur Tort film the vignettes in a manner which negates any eroticism, as they are instead interested in the logistics, the process and the unspoken transactions that are made between these consenting adults. It's a film which could arouse outrage, or boredom, or even a strange kind of mirth, and as such it feels as if Serra may have ended up making one of the seminal midnight movies.

DAVID JENKINS



Tenet

Directed by
CHRISTOPHER NOLAN
Starring
JOHN DAVID WASHINGTON
ROBERT PATTINSON
ELIZABETH DEBICKI
Released
26 AUGUST

5

ANTICIPATION.
About time.

3

ENJOYMENT.
A worthy successor to Inception.
Make of that what you will.

3

IN RETROSPECT.
Ask me again a few months ago.

Christopher Nolan's eleventh feature has certainly felt like a long time coming. Having initially been slated for release on 17 July, Warner Bros were forced to push it back three times due to the Covid-19 pandemic, meaning that it arrived in the UK 1133 days after *Dunkirk*. There has never been a bigger gap between Nolan films.

Time, of course, is relative in the Nolanverse. In *Tenet*, the director's long-standing obsession with this abstract concept reaches its logical apotheosis – although that palindromic title is something of a red herring, a quasi-mystical codeword that's vaguely defined and then almost immediately discarded. Given that this is a film apparently so conceptually knotty not even its principal cast seem to have the faintest clue what it's about, maybe it's best we don't venture too far down that particular wormhole.

As it turns out, *Tenet* is remarkably easy to follow. Nolan may construct a lofty premise around a galaxy-brain-level theorem while throwing around complex-sounding ideas like entropy, inversion algorithms and "temporal pincers" (band name!), but the film's basic chronology and structure are fairly straightforward. If Nolan has out-Nolaned himself, it's in the ultra-slick action set-pieces which, despite being of head-scrambling technical intricacy, are all carried off with astonishing economy. He may be stuck in a thematic loop, but Nolan continues to push the craft of in-camera special effects forward, once again engineering immersive, seat-shaking spectacle. Most crucially, the experimental filming techniques employed here are always in service of the story.

Tenet isn't just a showcase for Nolan's formal swagger. John David Washington is rock solid in the lead role, playing a man with no name or past whose eagerness to be the hero threatens to prevent him achieving just that. Robert Pattinson brings his A-game as an erudite British intelligence agent who might be in over his head (or is it someone else's?). Elizabeth Debicki gives a good performance as a scorned moll whose love for her young son unfortunately overpowers any other personality trait she might possess. Michael Caine eats a plate of chips.

And then there's Kenneth Branagh's Russian villainaire, Andrei Sator, who holds the key to unlocking the film's central mystery and whose sociopathic intentions are signalled by the alarming frequency with which he checks his Fitbit. When we first meet Sator, he openly brags about torturing a former adversary by stuffing the poor sod's testicles down his throat. Indeed, talking bollocks is a recurring feature of *Tenet* – not just in the contents of the dialogue but the often muffled manner of its delivery.

If the perception of Nolan at this stage is of a consummate showman who is operating within his comfort zone, it's worth noting that this is only his fourth original screenplay as a solo writer following, well, *Following*, *Inception* and *Dunkirk*. The truly remarkable thing about Nolan is the fact he's still pouring all of his creative energy into his own projects in his fourth decade as a director. He's still shooting on film, still mounting ambitious productions calibrated for the cinema experience. He's a box-office auteur who makes personal event movies on a $200m budget. Take it or leave it.

ADAM WOODWARD

"A truly beguiling performance from Sally Hawkins"

★★★★★

Loose Lips

"Innovative... refreshing... playful"

★★★★

Cinema Perspective

"Vivid and vital"

★★★★★

Jumpcut Online

Sally Hawkins Alice Lowe Billie Piper

WITH Penelope Wilton AND David Thewlis

Eternal Beauty

BFI, Welsh Government & Ffilm Cymru Wales PRESENT IN ASSOCIATION WITH Wellcome

a Cliff Edge Pictures PRODUCTION OF A Craig Roberts film "Eternal Beauty" Sally Hawkins Alice Lowe Billie Piper Robert Pugh

Morfydd Clark Paul Hilton Boyd Clack Elysia Welch WITH Penelope Wilton AND David Thewlis CASTING Karen Lindsay-Stewart Emily Jacobs

HAIR & MAKE-UP DESIGNER Samantha Kininmonth COSTUME DESIGNER Sian Jenkins LINE PRODUCER Catrin Lewis Defis ORIGINAL MUSIC Michael Price SOUND RECORDIST Malcolm Cromie

PRODUCTION DESIGNER Tim Dickel EDITOR Stephen Haren DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY Kit Fraser EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS Mary Burke Adam Partridge Emma Duffy Craig Roberts

Pip Broughton Paul Higgins Stephen Kelliher Hilary Davis PRODUCED BY Adrian Bate WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY Craig Roberts

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CERT TBC

Beyond the Visible: Hilma af Klint

Directed by
HALINA DYRSCHKA
Starring
JOSIAH MCELHENY
JULIA VOSS
Released
9 OCTOBER

3

ANTICIPATION.
Another art doc about a lost genius. Here we go again...

4

ENJOYMENT.
Oh wow, this one was lost for a reason, and Hilma af Klint actually was a genius.

4

IN RETROSPECT.
Af Klint's story of repression and erasure resonates far beyond the triffling confines of art history.

When I first saw the title for Halina Dyrschka's superb artworld documentary *Beyond the Visible: Hilma af Klint*, I thought that "Hilma af Klint" was a Scandinavian translation of the title's English-language version. That mistake is the reason why this film has been made, because Hilma af Klint was, in fact, one of the key proponents of abstract art in the West and may have been one of the first working abstract artists, beating current belt-holder Wassily Kandinsky to the punch by some two decades.

An aversion to self promotion, plus a dedication to the monastic, frugal, intently-focused life of a career painter in the Swedish island village of Munsö, meant that the act of excluding af Klint from the canon of modern art was a fairly easy one, even though the breadcrumb trail of her existence remained clear to anyone wanting to follow it. The film's various talking heads – historians, gallerists, novelists, journalists – convincingly frame af Klint as the victim of an avaricious creative domain that has been choked with male talent at the expense of women breaking through to stardom. And it's an issue that still exists today. One thing that is notable about this conventionally-constructed documentary is that many of those offering their two cents seem visibly angered about af Klint's erasure.

And yet Dyrschka's film is no simple corrective, opting instead for a celebration of the work on its own terms and a telling af Klint's story outside of the deafening echo chamber of official history. Her work often combined simple shapes and bold colour schemes, but always seemed to retain a certain earthiness and connection to the natural world, whether that's through the use of spiral shell patterns, or plant-like tendrils, or often flower petal formations. Alongside the images, the film takes great pains to try to understand and respect her personal philosophy. The term "respect" is key because she was a spiritualist and theosophist and it's thought that her adherence to these modes of thinking may have been one of the reasons she was not taken seriously (despite the fact that many male contemporaries believed in things that were just as wayward). When she sought guidance and encouragement from one of Europe's most prominent spiritualists, Rudolph Steiner, he dismissed her abstract work entirely, causing her to go on enforced hiatus.

It goes without saying that, knowing an artist's intentions behind a work, or perhaps being made aware of the headspace they were in while creating it, helps to unlock, or at least clarify its meaning. Yet with af Klint, her paintings, portraits and sketches were all illustrations of her thoughts, feelings and theories about the world, about physics, and the possibility of a place beyond existence. It's not that her life lacked drama, it's more that she appeared to reject it in the search of more fulfilling intellectual pursuits. The film sells her as a lost master, but still no-one is buying, as that would involve the hallowed institutions of the artworld having to admit they were wrong, and that major retrospective exhibitions from the past were presenting a purposefully maligned version of history. Hopefully this film helps to cement af Klint's reputation as a lynchpin of the expressionist art movement. **DAVID JENKINS**

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Interview by **LEILA LATIF** *Illustration by* **RUMBIDZAI MARILYN SAVANHU**

Nia DaCosta

The industrious director reveals how she put a personal stamp on her Jordan Peele-produced refit of horror classic, *Candyman*.

In an industry where Black female directors are few and far between Nia DaCosta is unprecedented. Her first film *Little Woods* premiered at Tribeca and won the Nora Ephron Award. After directing some of the finest episodes of *Top Boy* she was chosen by Jordan Peele to write and direct *Candyman*. Next she will helm the upcoming *Captain Marvel 2* (announced the day after this interview took place), the first sole female director on a Marvel film and the first Black woman director to enter this world. All this before her 31st birthday.

LWLies: Before embarking on this project, how did you process the racial politics of Bernard Rose's 1992 film version? DaCosta: That film is a product of its time. I love Bernard's work but it's told from an outsider's point of view. As a Black director I looked to do something more expansive. There were so many lenses through which you can watch this movie: through a feminist lens; through a white feminist lens; through the lens of race and gentrification. I wanted to expand on all of that.

When telling a story centred around a lynched Black man was it uncomfortable having his legacy be predominantly terrorising a Black community? Re-watching that movie I didn't get why he was killing Black people, and chasing after this white woman. We wanted to be a bit more specific in our film about exactly how Candyman operates. At the end of the first film you realise he's going after this woman as she's the reincarnated the love of his life who got him lynched in the first place and he's going to return the favour. We talked a lot about how to shift from that film to this one.

Clive Barker's novel picks at a privileged white saviour-narrative. Was that something you wanted to address? The first film has this white-saviour narrative with Helen at its centre. We talked about that when it came to continuing its legacy. Without giving anything away, the film turns that white-saviour narrative on its head.

This film has been described as a "spiritual sequel" despite being set at Cabrini Green and having returning characters. Why the distinction? It gives us the room to do something new and different with the source material. Bernard Rose took Clive Barker's story and changed it whilst keeping the essence, and we wanted to do the same thing.

Eddie Murphy's jokes in *Raw* that you can't make horror films with Black people because we would immediately leave a haunted house. It came to mind in your trailer when Teyonah Paris asks who would summon *Candyman* and the trailer cuts straight to a young white girl. Are those contrasts key to making a Black horror film? In a film like ours that is so much about race and about Black people being in a space of terror vs. white people being in a space of terror, that is a contrast that you can play with. But I also don't think that all horror films by Black filmmakers have to be centred around race-based trauma. Some people do just have a lot of freedom and some people don't, and in a film about black trauma, it's something you can have fun with.

People were so excited when the *Candyman* trailer dropped, but it was framed it as the new Jordan Peele film. How did you deal with that erasure? I get it. Jordan is the reason this film got made and the reason I got hired. He's the one that everyone knows. Having said that, there is definitely a tendency of erasing female filmmakers. I'm not invested in being a well-known director, but abstractly it was moving to then see people trying to set the record straight.

How has the collaboration with Jordan worked? I had to be able to express my own aesthetic and vision. We have very different aesthetics so it was hard to balance what I would do with the movie that we were all making. He always treated me as his equal rather than someone who should be learning from him. It was very interesting and there was a lot of negotiation along with lots of support for some of the weird things I wanted to do. He really pushed to put me forward, to emphasise that this was Nia's movie. He's mindful to not steal the spotlight or distract from what I was doing.

As a genre fan is there anything else you would like to create a spiritual sequel to? *The Cabin in the Woods* by Drew Goddard. At the end of the movie the gods from below come up and I would love to see what happened next.

So many writer/directors make their work semi-autobiographical. Are we going to see something about a young woman from New York? I'll probably never make a film about a young woman from New York. I think my next film is going to be very, very different from everything I've done so far.

So now you are in horror you don't think you are going to stay there? I never really saw myself as someone who would direct one type of movie or have a particular brand, y'know? It's not what interests me. I don't set out to do things very differently every time, it is nice to have some variety

Candyman *opens in cinemas on 16 October.*

Train to Busan Presents: Peninsula

Directed by
YEON SANG-HO
Starring
GANG DONG-WON
LEE JUNG-HYUN
LEE RE
Released
6 NOVEMBER

4

ANTICIPATION.
Train to Busan *was the unexpected zombie smash of 2016.*

3

ENJOYMENT.
Peninsula *doesn't hit as hard but it's knockaround fun.*

3

IN RETROSPECT.
If you don't expect a Busan *re-run, you should find something in this.*

Lightning never strikes twice, and when it comes to making movies, directors often count themselves lucky if they have managed to bottle a couple of bolts. The 2016 film *Train to Busan* became something of a sleeper hit when audiences around the globe succumbed to its tight plotting and breathless action sequences. A rambunctious, volatile genre blow-out, it nails the zombie tropes effectively coined by George A Romero back with *Night of the Living Dead* and subconsciously became a crystal ball to our current Trying Times. As tired as those words may sound, *Train to Busan*'s efficient skewing of class in 2016 is all too telling as the world now faces its own pandemic in 2020, with the same archetypes we follow in the movie becoming the real-life victims of Covid-19.

The success of *Train to Busan* has allowed the film's director, Yeon Sang-ho, to make a second visit to the Busan universe. Yeon wishes it to be clear that *Peninsula* is not a direct sequel or continuation of that story, although the cloudy-eyed cavalcade of sprinting undead do make a comeback.

Peninsula instead follows Marine Captain Jung-seok (Gang Dong-won), who escaped the zombie outbreak in Korea while enduring some deep heartbreak in doing so. Four years later, finding refuge in Hong Kong, he is given the chance to return to Korea and earn a fat wedge. This is *Wages of Fear* territory: a man who barely has refugee status in his new home has the chance to make serious bank if he embarks on a suicide mission. His reluctant acceptance of the deal lands him in a Korea that is now unrecognisable, in which the dangers that lie in front of him are not only the roaming undead hordes.

Peninsula's new direction brings with it a glut of pros and cons. Sequels are usually about expansion. More of the same, but bigger. And while Yeon's film may not be a sequel in the traditional sense, he has used this opportunity to expand his scope. No longer stuck within the confines of a train, *Peninsula* has a city to roam in, with Korea now appearing as a mish-mash of the dilapidated hellscapes of John Carpenter's *Escape from New York* and Sony's recent immersive "cinematic" computer game, *The Last of Us Part II*. This does make for some entertaining imagery. Glass staircases are now tombs of writhing bodies. There's a golden-hued arena for feral survivors to watch new participants of a devious event simply named "The Game". Yeon is also allowed to shoot wider and bring in more characters, giving a real feel that the conflicts seen in the first episode were truly a microcosm of the whole nation in turmoil.

However, the film's broader setting removes much of the intimacy which made *Train to Busan* as potent as it was. *Peninsula* merrily delivers lightweight yet entertaining set-pieces, but is bogged down by a stodgy second act. It finishes strongly, tugging on those same heartstrings that the original managed to do so well. And the film still shows a glimmer of interest in socio-political aspects. Those who are looking for that same gut-punch, however, may be disappointed.

LESLIE BYRON PITT

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Miss Juneteenth

Directed by
CHANNING GODFREY PEOPLES
Starring
NICOLE BEHARIE
KENDRICK SAMPSON
ALEXIS CHIKAEZE
Released
25 SEPTEMBER

4

ANTICIPATION.
The debut of a Black female filmmaker, with the incredible , underrated Nicole Beharie front and centre.

4

ENJOYMENT.
A deeply affecting drama that delivers gut punches, as well as warmth.

4

IN RETROSPECT.
A skillful, nuanced take on a traditional survival narrative.

What is a 'phenomenal woman'? In a towering performance, actor Nicole Beharie plays a former beauty queen preparing her rebellious daughter for the Miss Juneteenth pageant. This powerful directorial debut from Channing Godfrey Peoples explores themes of Black motherhood, womanhood and the meaning of freedom. Peoples, who also wrote the film, draws on her own experiences growing up in Fort Worth, Texas to tell a story that doubles as a love letter to Southern Black culture.

Commemorated on 19 June, 1865, Juneteenth is a holiday celebrating the last slaves in Texas being freed after receiving news of the abolition of slavery two-and-a-half years earlier. We meet Turquoise Jones (Beharie) as she begins her shift at the local bar. As she walks, mop and bucket in hand, we see the portrait of her past victory in the Miss Juneteenth pageant as it hangs on the wall.

Becoming Miss Juneteenth is a sign of poise, beauty and potential. It brings admiration and elevates the winner above the confines of smalltown life. This promise, however, has eluded Turquoise, and she struggles to make ends meet while raising her teenage daughter, Kai (Alexis Chikaeze). Switching between jobs, and leaning on Kai's well-meaning but unreliable father, Ronnie (Kendrick Sampson), Turquoise is driven by dreams of Kai following in her footsteps and being crowned Miss Juneteenth.

As Turquoise pushes Kai into pageant preparation, we watch as she pins her hopes on her daughter winning the title, which includes a fully-paid college scholarship and being able to step into the identity of the respectable, enviable woman Turquoise is reminded daily that she was never able to become.

Beharie plays Turquoise with a quiet, steely resilience, imbuing her with a vulnerability that doesn't announce itself loudly, but is present in the hopeful flicker in her eyes as she watches Kai from the crowd. In Beharie, Peoples has found the perfect foil to portray the unshakable strength of Black motherhood, juxtaposed with the heartbreaking fragility of a woman trapped by socioeconomic conditions and seeking refuge in a pageant that, we can see, stifles her daughter rather than frees her.

Peoples adeptly takes the familiar story of deprivation, disappointment and survival, and filters it through a lens that locates a brightness in the characters who live and dream in Fort Worth. Black cowboys strutting down a parade line, middle-aged folk line-dancing in the bar, dance teams made up of girls with luminous braids bouncing confidently. The film conveys the tough realities facing a small-town Black community, but it is also just as keen to showcase the joy and cultural pride that remains undiminished in these locales.

Miss Juneteenth is a film that often references the 1995 Maya Angelou poem 'Phenomenal Woman'. In planting a story that is ultimately about hope, in the struggles and culture of a people whose resilience is astounding in itself, Peoples' stunning film reminds us that wrestling joy from the jaws of tribulation can be the most phenomenal act of all.

CHEYENNE BUNSIE

Interview by ROGAN GRAHAM *Illustration by* RUMBIDZAI MARILYN SAVANHU

Channing Godfrey Peoples

Don't be fooled by the surface-level frivolity of *Miss Juneteenth* says its canny, thoughtful director.

Miss Juneteenth is the debut feature from writer/director Channing Godfrey Peoples. It focuses on the deferred dreams of former pageant queen Turquoise Jones (Nicole Beharie) and her plan to convince her daughter to secure the same crown and a university scholarship as she did.

LWLies: Could I start by asking you to explain what the Juneteenth pageant is? Peoples: Juneteenth is a day to commemorate the fact that the enslaved people in Texas didn't find out they were free until two-and-a-half years after everyone else. The emancipation proclamation happened in 1863, the enslaved people in Texas didn't find out until 1865. Their freedom was kept hidden from them. As a kid it was the parades, the blues music, barbecue – I looked forward to the sense of community. As an adult, it became about reverence. You were asking me about the pageant?

What significance does it hold for you? It was so special to me because it gave me a sense of confidence when I saw those young Black women. It looked like they were gliding across the stage. They had hope on their faces and a sense of wonder for their futures. It was my version of Miss America.

Going back to what you said about reverence, the film is almost haunting in some ways. It's funny you say that because I believe so much that the ancestors are ever-present. I've always been fascinated with lineage. In the South, you just accept that people that aren't here still shape your life in the present. They still live through the oral tradition.

The film focuses on Turquoise's ability to imagine something more for herself, and if that doesn't work out, then she can imagine something different. Her daughter has that same trait, but they're misaligned even though they want the same outcome. It was really important to find the rhythm of this mother-daughter relationship. The script was always built to focus on Turquoise's journey, she's in almost every scene. I really wanted us to tell a story about a Black woman with a dream deferred. Even if she can't articulate exactly what it is, she wants something for herself. She's reconciling her own dreams and ideas about herself with the hopes and dreams that she has for her child.

I became a mother not too long before we filmed. I had a tougher-love version of Turquoise on paper. But I think my personal perspective was that of a daughter. Then after becoming a mom, there were two things that I can remember: I remember being immediately joyful, but also there was this brushing terror. How do I take care of this little human being and provide for her future?

Was there a tough-love version of the film, just because pageant moms are often thought of as resentful, yet Turquoise is so nurturing? Definitely there was a tough-love version on paper, but my daughter changed so much. The thing that struck me was that indescribable sense of joy. When directing, I was constantly saying, 'Okay, no matter what we do, we have to find the joy!'

Can you discuss your cinematic influences? I really love Charles Burnett, I love *My Brother's Wedding*. A lot of his work has that poetic nature that I was mentioning. Now they have these websites where you can just go and see film stills, but I remember painstakingly screenshotting frame-by-frame of *Killer of Sheep*. I love Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*. I remember being moved by it, how she showed us a community that I hadn't seen on film before. You have that sense of what we're talking about, that oral tradition.

Often when there's anything about a working class community, struggle equals ugliness or coldness. But that isn't the case in *Miss Juneteenth*. I love that you feel that from the film. The community that I grew up in opened their doors to me. The film wouldn't feel as authentic without them. Where the film is set it feels timeless, the bar is multigenerational, you go in there and get that sense of family. If people are finding a way to survive, it's not always about the struggle, it's about the connection and love between the people, and finding a way to these small moments of joy

Herself

Directed by
PHYLLIDA LLOYD
Starring
CLARE DUNNE
HARRIET WALTER
CATHY BELTON
Released
30 OCTOBER

3

ANTICIPATION.
Sounds like a change of pace for Lloyd.

4

ENJOYMENT.
Devastating but never manipulative in how it deploys its hard-hitting plot.

4

IN RETROSPECT.
A story about human kindness and cruelty, powered by Dunne's script and performance.

Phyllida Lloyd's latest feature feels smaller than her previous two big budget productions, 2008's *Mamma Mia!* and 2011's *The Iron Lady*, both of which starred Meryl Streep alongside an ensemble of familiar faces. In *Herself*, largely unknown performers take centre stage, led by Lloyd's fearless co-writer Clare Dunne as the central character, Sandra. It might also just be the filmmaker's finest work to date – an intimate portrait of one woman's struggle to improve life for herself and her young children after fleeing an abusive relationship.

Forced into temporary accommodation at an airport hotel – where the family are forbidden from using the guest entrance for fear their appearance might startle the paying guests – Sandra works two jobs to support her resilient daughters Emma and Molly (played by scene-stealers Ruby Rose O'Hara and Molly McCann), all the while undermined by her estranged husband Gary, who attempts to gaslight her into returning to him. Despairing of her situation and desperate to keep her family safe, Sandra embarks on an unconventional journey to build her own "tiny home" from scratch, aided by her generous employer Peggy (Harriet Walter) and a group of supportive friends and well-wishers.

There are shades of Ken Loach and Mike Leigh's grim social realism here, but not a trace of melodrama. Dunne approaches Sandra's story from a matter-of-fact vantage, showing how for many victims of abuse reflection is a luxury they simply cannot afford, not to mention how the systems put in place to protect such people often fail them. In a heartbreaking example of the cruelty of one such system, Sandra is forced to drop her daughters off at her ex-husband's home every weekend due to their custody agreement, regardless of how traumatic it is for her, not to mention the children who witnessed their father's abusive behaviour.

The absurdity of Sandra's situation might be hard to fathom, but it's daily life for millions of women across the world who are forced to share close quarters with their abusers. Lloyd and Dunne succeed in giving a voice to the voiceless while also offering a nuanced, dignified portrait of a woman rediscovering herself after years of living in fear. Neither Sandra nor her children are defined merely by their circumstances or experiences, and the film takes great pains to demonstrate that there is also love and joy in their lives as well as pain. Lloyd's direction ensures we experience this story through Sandra's eyes, and sudden flashbacks to Gary's abusive episodes call to mind the fractured experience of PTSD.

So many films are branded 'urgent' nowadays, but in the case of *Herself* the term really does feel apt. Reform of women's rights as a way to ensure better protection from violence is essential; Lloyd's unfailingly compassionate film highlights this political aim while managing to remain full of tenderness. For all the darkness and pain Sandra and her daughters live through, there's light too, and the found family that rises up from the embers of trauma give them something they haven't experienced in a long time: hope.

HANNAH WOODHEAD

The Other Lamb

Directed by
MAŁGORZATA SZUMOWSKA
Starring
RAFFEY CASSIDY
MICHIEL HUISMAN
MALLORY ADAMS
Released
16 OCTOBER

3

ANTICIPATION.
Raffey Cassidy was terrific in The Killing of a Sacred Deer.

2

ENJOYMENT.
Disturbing acts of violence to women and animals intercut with periods of excruciating silence.

2

IN RETROSPECT.
Still waiting for female-directed horror films which break the genre's misogynistic tropes.

When *The Other Lamb* screened at the 2019 San Sebastián Film Festival, there was a young woman who watched the whole film through the lens of her iPhone. She wasn't recording, just posting stills decorated with 'OMG' and 'WOW' on social media. Normally you'd tap them on the shoulder and politely ask them to stop, but that's rather futile when most of the audience are also dipping their phones up and down to photograph the screen. *The Other Lamb* is an Instagram story, a sequence of hotspot photoshoots edited into a barely coherent stream of consciousness. It is interminably banal.

Filmed on location in the Irish countryside, the film's landscape shots are nicely captured by cinematographer Michał Englert. They provide some respite from the otherwise nauseating turbulence inflicted by the unsteady camera, now in low angle from the muddy grass, halfway up Michiel Huisman's hairy nose. *The Other Lamb* immediately displays a propensity for style over emotive substance and empathetic characters.

That's not to say there aren't emotions on display in *The Other Lamb* – nary a scene goes by without someone doing their best banshee-wail or showing off their ability to balance a single tear on their cheek. The female cult led by Huisman's Christ-like patriarch, literally credited as 'Shepherd', presents as an amateur theatre group going wild in the woods, their bloody tantrums repeatedly captured in slow-motion as if things needed dragging out any longer.

The entourage of newcomers are led by Raffey Cassidy as Selah, whose performance in Yorgos Lanthimos' *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* had seemed promising for a career in horror. Here she's just beaten around by Shepherd, gagged and raped without any tangible comeuppance for the film not to feel misogynistic itself.

It's possible director Małgorzata Szumowska felt she was giving her female characters real agency. Among the opaque cuts to floating cloths and a melted Barbie doll we see Selah fantasise about killing Shepherd. *The Other Lamb* mistakes the idea of revolution for the action itself – the mental seed of rebellion is not strong enough in itself to overcome oppression.

There's plenty of blood and guts – too much – with some stomach-churning acts of animal violence. The film seems to be trying to say something about the dangers of making menstruation taboo, but in its exaggerated pointedness it only makes menstrual blood seem more macabre than it really is. As Greta Gerwig's character shows in Mike Mills's *20th Century Women*, just talking about it openly is enough.

Therein lies the greatest fault of *The Other Lamb* – convinced it's making a profound comment on patriarchy, it ends up saying nothing at all. To revel in themes of sexual assault and incest plays to a misogynistic form of narrative pleasure upon which horror films thrive. Rather than critiquing practices it purports to condemn, *The Other Lamb* becomes party to the evils it depicts. Perhaps it's for the best people at the screening were too busy photographing the pretty landscapes to take its message to heart.

LILLIAN CRAWFORD

Interview by DAVID JENKINS *Illustration by* RUMBIDZAI MARILYN SAVANHU

Ben Wheatley

Something a little different for the Brit maverick: a plush period adaptation of Daphne du Maurier's timeless mystery, 'Rebecca'.

Here is a man known for his love of scrungy genre and light-handed skill when it comes to directing actors. But the talent behind *Kill List*, *Sightseers*, *High-Rise* and *Happy New Year, Colin Burstead*, has made a screen adaptation of perhaps the most cherished modern novel ever to be penned by a British writer, Daphne du Maurier's 'Rebecca'.

LWLies: What was your first encounter with the story of 'Rebecca'? Wheatley: My relationship with it over time is kind of a misty one. I'm sure I saw the film in the kind of fever dream of watching lots of movies in my twenties, because I would've watched all of the Hitchcock movies and I watched all the noir and gobbled it all down in great gulps. It pops up in culture all the time. It casts a long shadow because it keeps coming back in various guises. So I had a relationship with it, but it wasn't until I'd been working with Working Title on some other development stuff and they said they'd got this Jane Goldman script of *Rebecca* and I was like, 'Wow, that's really interesting.' I hadn't really thought about it and, generally when I choose stuff, it's as far from what I am currently doing as possible, and that's what usually makes me choose things. I just think, 'Oh, God, that is so not like *Free Fire* or *Colin Burstead*.'

How much did the Hitchcock film play into your new version? Not much. Just on a practical level it's a reaction to Jane's script. So that's my reaction to it, and what made me make the film. I'd never have the idea to remake Hitchcock – that's madness. It's a reaction to the script and a reaction to the book and that's it. Beyond that, once you get into it, we also wanted to make something that's modern. We didn't really look at the film for research. The visual research was much more about giving the '30s a fresh feel. I looked at a lot of colour photographs from the era and latched on to how contemporary it all looks. I wanted to draw the audience back into a past that didn't feel like it was completely in the past.

Visually this is quite different for you and your regular cinematographer Laurie Rose. Do you ever find that he's taking ideas from other projects he's done and bringing them to you? I see it as kind of a partner-piece to *High Rise* really because of the scale. But Laurie, the thing that he brings that's different to how we'd normally work is that he works on a bigger scale and that's whole skill set that is a complicated world in itself, of how to light bigger and bigger spaces. So by the time you get to the boat house scene he's lighting almost a quarter of a square mile of space around there. They're absolutely ginormous the lights that we used for that, and I think he was saying that was the biggest thing he'd ever lit.

It seems like a far cry from your previous film, the micro-budget *Happy New Year, Colin Burstead*. Is that the case? Yeah, you know the answer. Is it a massively different film for me to make? I mean, you look at the filmography, *Colin Burstead* and *Down Terrace* kind of fit together, and *A Field in England* too. They're shot over a very small area. *Kill List* and *Sightseers* have a different aesthetic to them, because once you get into bigger budget stuff, you start to get more control over the image, how you move the camera, how you light it, and also you have an art department. For a lower budget film, the art department is the first thing that suffers. Well, not suffers, but I remember with *High-Rise* they were enormous and they were making all the books on the bookshelves and the cans of beans in the supermarket, and they were getting into all that. You can't even have that conversation on something like *Colin Burstead*.

Do you prefer having that bit more control over the image and over what you're making and it being bigger, or giving up some of that control and doing something smaller? I've said it a lot but I think I've always seen it as there being genres of subject but also genres of budget, and those genres of budget are micro-budget, low-budget, middle- and high-budget, which make for totally different filmmaking experiences. They're apples and pears. You can't really draw comparisons between them. So there's a great joy in low budget where you're working with actors for most of the day and there's no pausing, it's more like theatre where you're just in that filmmaking moment the whole time. But then on the bigger budget stuff, there's much more scale and you know you're going out to a bigger audience, you know that you have complete control over the image. And I don't think those two positions can ever really meet. But I like both, and that's why I keep going back. It's not because my career is going up and down like a yo-yo, it's more that I like working and I like low-budget. I mean, we're shooting something in August which is going straight into a 15-day shoot. Just because it's fun.

Can you say anything more? Yeah, it's a horror film and it's basically post-Covid. I remember sitting down and watching some of the VOD stuff at the beginning of the lockdown and thinking everything's out of date, everything that's contemporary now just does't make sense, and I asked myself what a post-Covid film would look like, so I thought I'd write one, just to keep my head together with lockdown happening. And I was chatting to Andy [Starke, Wheatley's production partner] and we thought we should probably make this, so we're going to do it and slip it in pre-*Tomb Raider*

Rebecca *is released on Netflix on 21 October.*

Mogul Mowgli

Directed by **BASSAM TARIQ**
Starring **RIZ AHMED, AIYSHA HART, KIRAN SONIA SAWAR**
Released **30 OCTOBER**

When Zed (Riz Ahmed) raps, he does it "for the mosque and the mosh pit." His sharp, feverish bars arrive with the tenacity of slam poetry and the weight of his world within them. His life is in his lyrics: the racism he's faced; his struggles with identity; the enduring question of "where are you really from?" He finds space in his music to investigate these feelings, but Zed hasn't been home to his own family in two years, choosing instead to hide out in the States to pursue his music career from afar. Only the chance to support another musician on a European tour, and a separation from his emotionally distant girlfriend Bina, sends him on a return trip to London.

Back at his parents' home, Zed is forced to re-engage with the life he's distanced himself from, "the business of Britishness" (as he himself raps) in the Pakistani diaspora. There are plenty of souvenirs of his youth in the house, notably the t-shirts and aprons bearing the logos of his father's failed business ventures. When his father is asked to recall the horrors of the journey he made from India to Pakistan during the partition in 1947, Zed becomes guarded, perhaps afraid of what he might learn. A sudden illness and Zed's hospitalisation opens this door even further, with his career on the line and the notion of legacy, in many forms, at stake.

Questions of heritage and history, of bloodlines and independence, make *Mogul Mowgli* a sincere and balanced work, at its best in quickfire dream sequences, such as Zed's visions of the mysterious 'Toba Tek Singh'. Director Bassam Tariq beautifully captures the textures of Zed's world and his father's memories that infiltrate his new understanding of his life: the dust, ashes, talc, spices, crushed flowers. A few shifts in tone feel occasionally jarring, but the film steers away from being too sentimental and finds a moving and invigorating conclusion with Ahmed firmly at its thumping heart. **CAITLIN QUINLAN**

ANTICIPATION. *Scripted by and starring one of Britain's most exciting actors? Count me in.* **4**

ENJOYMENT. *Gutsy bravado and heartfelt nostalgia are brilliantly intertwined in this invigorating drama.* **4**

IN RETROSPECT. *Riz Ahmed's electric performance is hard to forget.* **4**

23 Walks

Directed by **PAUL MORRISON**
Starring **ALISON STEADMAN, DAVE JOHNS, NATALIE SIMPSON**
Released **25 SEPTEMBER**

The formula of the 'grey pound' is well-established. Get some familiar (white British) faces, stir in enough saccharine to keep the oldies awake, and add some relatable geriatric humour. What's often surprising about these films is just how bleak they can be – alleged 'feel-good' films like 2017's *Finding Your Feet* and 2012's *Song for Marion* killed off half their casts. Rather than offering uplift they just end up upsetting my old nan. It's more than she bargains for when she rocks up to the cinema on a Thursday morning for her free cuppa and digestive biscuit.

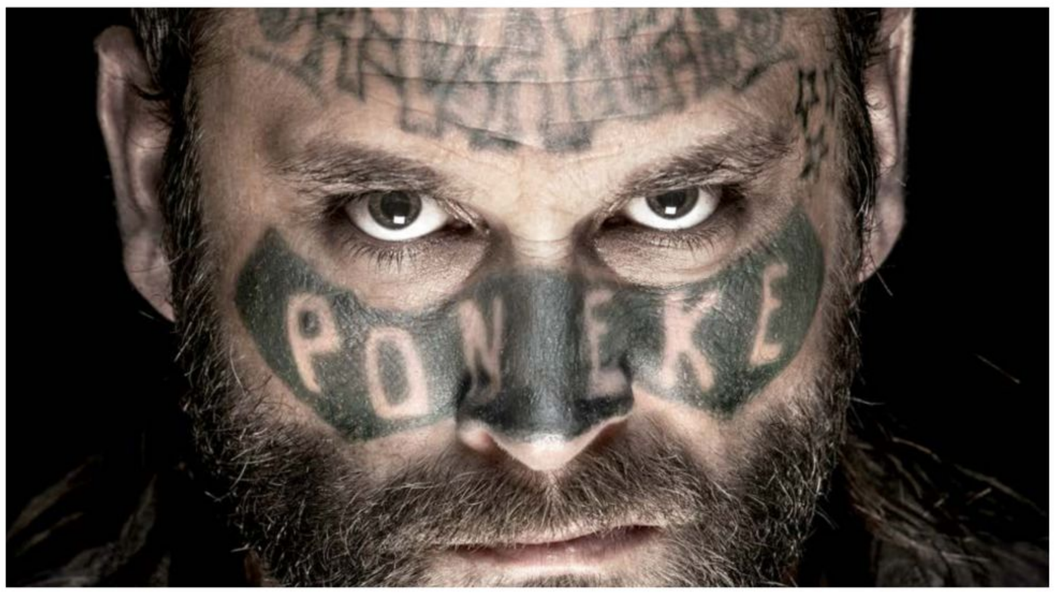
Nan would like *23 Walks* – it's light, sweet and mostly inoffensive. There's a hint of xenophobia: Alison Steadman's daughter has run off to the Canaries to marry "a Spaniard", but she comes round to the idea, learning the language and looking forward to the trip. There's even a very odd scene in which she dons a black dress and starts singing to an attentive audience of dogwalkers. Nan wouldn't like the occasional bad language and fairly explicit sex, with the 12A certificate likely to put her off.

Conversely, it's those saltier moments that are the most enjoyable. While Dave Johns seems less at home with the wooden meet-cute dialogue of Paul Morrison's screenplay than he did with the rawness of his lead role in Ken Loach's *I, Daniel Blake*, he's more convincing when he's hurling expletives into the bushes. Steadman's hesitant desire to rekindle her sexuality is heartbreaking, and her girlish glee when the moment finally comes elicits a smile. Considering it's called *23 Walks*, it's the domestic moments that shine, although the adorable canines Henry and Tilly are worthy supporting stars. Maybe not quite enough to warm a sceptic's heart, but certainly a pleasant enough outing for your nan. **LILLIAN CRAWFORD**

ANTICIPATION. *Didn't Paul Morrison do that film with Robert Pattinson as Salvador Dali?* **2**

ENJOYMENT. *Alison Steadman creates some beautifully tender moments from weak material.* **3**

IN RETROSPECT. *Mostly harmless.* **2**



Savage

Directed by **SAM KELLY**
Starring **JAKE RYAN, JOHN TUI, CHELSIE PRESTON CRAYFORD**
Released **11 SEPTEMBER**

The film *Savage* opens with a tattoo-faced man with nicknamed "Damage" smashing a fellow gang member's hand with a claw hammer. One expects an unflinching exploitation romp but first-time director Sam Kelly instead offers a considered look at toxic masculinity in New Zealand. More brutality follows but there is also feeling and, eventually, growth.

It's 1989 and middle-aged Damage, née Danny, (Jake Ryan) is chief enforcer of the Savages, a crew run by best pal Moses (John Tui), a Māori gang president whose tenure looks increasingly uncertain as dissenting cohorts vie for his position. The Savages hang out in what looks like a decrepit scrapyard, far removed from the glam-trash sexiness and lucrative gun-running of, say, *Sons of Anarchy*.

A flashback to 1965 shows how a scary, presumably violent father and pre-pubescent Danny's robbery of a sweet shop lead him to the Borstal where he meets Moses. The pair become friends when Danny stops Moses from being beaten by a warden and administers retribution with the warden's own cosh. Danny is sexually abused by another warden and his lifetime of male mistrust calcifies. In 1978, Moses starts the Savages with a pugnacious spoken manifesto. "We'll take your cars and your house," he spits and Danny has to choose between siding with his estranged brother Liam and Moses' nascent upsetters.

As with his 2011 short *Lamb*, Kelly based the story on real-life NZ gang tales and the moving tripartite story has a refreshing authenticity. Ryan is convincing as a broken brutaliser and Tui likewise as a man who let power go his head: King Lear in sleeveless denim. The film doesn't have a substantial part for a woman nor much to say bar the obvious about abused men becoming agents of violence. Still, Kelly's work has promise, even if a New Zealand crime family is more memorably portrayed in 1994's *Once Were Warriors*. **LOU THOMAS**

ANTICIPATION. *A new director working with vicious material and proven interest in his subject.* **3**

ENJOYMENT. *Ticks along viciously enough but we've seen it before, and done better.* **3**

IN RETROSPECT. *Considered storytelling amid the ` coshing. An auspicious debut from Sam Kelly.* **3**

White Riot

Directed by **RUBIKA SHAH**
Starring **RED SAUNDERS, DENNIS BOVELL, MYKAELL RILEY**
Released **18 SEPTEMBER**

"Do we have any foreigners in the audience tonight? If so, please put up your hands. Wogs I mean, I'm looking at you [...] Wherever you all are, I think you should all just leave. Not just leave the hall, leave our country." That was Eric Clapton addressing his fans at a gig in Birmingham on 5 August, 1976. It was rock's 'Rivers of Blood' moment; indeed the former Cream frontman urged the crowd that night to support Enoch Powell. Clapton's racist tirade was as shocking 40 years ago as it is now, yet such rhetoric continues to be used by contemporary public figures, stoking racial tensions in a nation built on the falacy of white exceptionalism.

The response in '76 was swift. 'Rock Against Racism' had been conceived some months earlier, but it was Clapton's rant which ultimately led Red Saunders, Roger Huddle, Jo Wreford and Pete Bruno to stand up to the rise of far-right populism. Rubika Shah's incisive documentary chronicles the history of RAR from its early days as a grass-roots protest movement, putting on fundraising gigs across the country and launching a punk fanzine, to its pinnacle in the spring of '78 when more than 100,000 people marched from Trafalgar Square to Tower Hamlets in East London, where the National Front had won 17 per cent of the vote at the recent byelection.

Much of the second half of the film centres around The Clash's performance at the now legendary open-air concert in Victoria Park, and there's great archive footage of the support acts from that day too: Steel Pulse, X-Ray Spex, the Tom Robinson Band and Sham 69's Jimmy Pursey. Various talking heads associated with the occasion reflect on its legacy, adding invaluable insight while serving up a few choice soundbites. But Shah's masterstroke is the inclusion of slogans used by fascist groups of the time, some of which feature remarkably similar language to modern campaigns by pro-Brexit parties. Just as beats were used to fight bigotry, it's good to see film being used to the same ends today. **ADAM WOODWARD**

ANTICIPATION. *I want to riot!* **4**

ENJOYMENT. *Gets to the heart of what it means to be anti-racist, and the tunes ain't half bad either.* **4**

IN RETROSPECT. *It's a cliché to describe a film as "essential viewing", but this really is.* **4**

Relic

Directed by
NATALIE ERIKA JAMES
Starring
EMILY MORTIMER
ROBYN NEVIN
BELLA HEATHCOTE
Released
30 OCTOBER

3

ANTICIPATION.
Hereditary 2: Aus-Gothic Boogaloo?

4

ENJOYMENT.
That finale will live in my mind rent-free in perpetuity.

5

IN RETROSPECT.
An earth-toned ghost story about the ravages of time.

Matriarchy is a haunted house in this psychological horror about memory, aging and empathy. The debut feature from Japanese-Australian filmmaker Natalie Erika James, *Relic* explores the fear and shame allied to Alzheimer's disease – an interior condition here rendered visible, visceral, in the form of a weatherboard house mottled with black mould. Inside, three generations of women exorcise their grief, tethered by familial bonds and the question of genetic destiny.

When elderly widow Edna (Robyn Nevin, *The Matrix* franchise's Councillor Dillard) vanishes in leafy regional Victoria, her tetchy daughter Kay (Emily Mortimer) and lax granddaughter Sam (Bella Heathcote) call upon the family manor, searching for its AWOL matriarch. Then, as mysteriously as she disappeared, Edna returns, marked by dark bruises, missing time, and distressed with a menacing presence in the house. Dank, heavy and pallid, *Relic* is Australian Gothic. That said, it resists the canon's typically colonial worries about dangerous bushland (and, by extension, that land's first peoples). Instead, it centres on traditional Gothic fixtures like 'home' and 'family' to tell this tale of moral obligation.

Relic is an exercise in control and denial. As Edna's health deteriorates, the story unfolds mostly from Kay's point of view, hinging on her role as a carer learning to nurse a parent, just as that parent once nursed her. Edna, on the other hand, becomes more Other than mother. Gradually eking out crucial backstory, James and co-writer Christian White create a clammy likeness of family dynamics: it's never quite clear whose perception – if anyone's – is untouched by guilt, dread and indignation. This ambiguity echoes the destabilising nature of neurological decline. One claustrophobic sequence even traps Sam within the house's walls, blurring her spatial and sensory processing abilities, forcing the young woman to enter her grandmother's headspace.

The house itself is plagued by brown and green mundanity, laden with such cottagecore horrors as wallpaper, carpeting and drapes. Textures like wool, velvet and paper speak to plush creature comforts, but everything organic must eventually break down. To that end, a pretty leadlight window becomes an awkward MacGuffin, linked to a great grandfather's degenerative illness (and its spectral/fungal repercussions). This complicates the film's house-as-mind metaphor and muddies its maternal motifs. Still, *Relic* avoids leaning into some easy generic cliches, as James subverts familiar horror tropes like the slasher's Final Girl and folklore's old crone.

When the third act tips from messy into monstrous, Edna's decaying body could be leveraged as a site of perverse fascination, or abject disgust. Kay takes pains to assure her daughter that the old hag terrorising the house is no longer the nanna they knew and loved. So there's an unexpected tenderness to the bizarre finale, in which Kay performs something akin to last rites on her mother's soiled form, stripping back layers of family mythos for one last – or maybe first – look at the person inside.

Gran's memory palace has succumbed to a moth-eaten cosmos. Her successors can finally go home again, for the time being. **AIMEE KNIGHT**

Monsoon

Directed by
HONG KHAOU
Starring
HENRY GOLDING
PARKER SAWYERS
DAVID TRAN
Released
25 SEPTEMBER

4

ANTICIPATION.
Lilting *is a gem and Khaou's Cambodian-British perspective is one we were eager to revisit.*

4

ENJOYMENT.
Therapeutic to follow this breathtaking healing journey.

4

IN RETROSPECT.
In under 90 minutes, this fleeting character study leaves a lasting, optimistic impression of love and friendship.

Kit (Henry Golding) returns to Ho Chi Minh City after 30 years, having fled with his family during the Vietnam war. Despite his heritage, he is now almost a tourist in the city, easily lost in the pandemonium of traffic. His goal is to find a place to scatter his mother's ashes, but as he wanders, bewildered and overwhelmed, he struggles to find any emotional connection to the places he once knew.

As with his first feature, 2014's *Lilting*, writer/director Hong Khaou doesn't deal with the immediacies of tragedy. Without visualising painful memories or lost characters, *Monsoon* dwells solely on the hollow void left behind. This approach relies on Golding's performance; his adrift demeanour when he's alone tells the story of his loss. Employing the vulnerability that made his previous comic performances in *Crazy Rich Asians* and *Last Christmas* so desirable, the expression behind his British reserve exudes an unwanted feeling of displacement. His disappointment at being unable to recognise the few childhood haunts he still remembered, now paved over and forgotten, is palpable. The writing leaves room for the awkward silences and, later, self-flagellation that lingers in the discomfort of communication.

The film's dialogue powers various stunningly tactile sequences each led by Kit's companions: a relative (David Tran); a lover (Parker Sawyers); and a friend (Molly Harris). Vietnam suddenly becomes less intimidating and the camera less hesitant as Kit rediscovers a sense of belonging. As he becomes more in touch with himself and the landscape – holding cold beers, gripping the back of a motorcycle, cutting lotus flowers – his roots regrow in new surroundings.

With his parents' legacy almost erased after their untimely departure, Kit discovers much about the Vietnam they left behind, as well as the one blossoming in its place. Though the towering sleek architecture of District 2 is cold and overbearing at first, its soul is slowly uncovered through its youthful, vibrant inhabitants. Kit's relationship with Lewis, an African-American whose father fought in the War, is especially poignant, as the pair mirror one another's generational trauma. Comparatively, they are refreshingly comfortable in their sexuality – their connection not just a symbolic bridge but a specific, sweet dynamic between one so open and one so lost yet guarded.

Khaou was born in Cambodia, but spent his childhood in Vietnam before he and his family fled, and the emotions of this experiences shine through Golding's character. Each interaction rings true to the young immigrant's experience. He captures the careful navigation of this emotional grey area, of appearing like you fit in and betraying your Western upbringing when you speak, and vice versa. We see him torn three ways between loyalty to his parent's wishes, respect for their decisions and a desire to find his own path.

This dichotomy is one that Lulu Wang dealt with so magnificently in *The Farewell*, though here it's posthumous, with a character grieving not only for lost parents but for a lost timeline where his identity wasn't split in two. Though these weighty conflicts are only touched upon, the nuanced performances and the simple script articulate these sentiments potently. *Monsoon* is a hopeful, considered piece of cinema, quietly revealing and careful in its resolution of this unique turmoil. **FATIMA SHERIFF**

A Perfectly Normal Family

Directed by **MALOU REYMANN**
Starring **JESSICA DINNAGE, MIKKEL BOE FØLSGAARD, KAYA TOFT LOHOLT**
Released **2 OCTOBER**

There's no such thing as *A Perfectly Normal Family*. Yet everyone in Malou Reymann's directorial debut believes there is. Grandad thinks if he persists in deadnaming and misgendering his daughter-in-law, she'll stop correcting him. Daughter Emma (Kaya Toft Lohalt) tries tying a scarf around her head to stop her parent wearing feminine clothing. Everyone lives in denial, and even when on the surface they start to accept things as they are, they never try to understand. Empathy rests with them, the cis family members, while the transitioning character is largely ignored and pushed into the sidelines.

Reymann approaches her subject with good intentions – her own parent, who she still calls her 'father' despite being a woman, transitioned when she was a child. She indulges in her own perspective through Emma, empathising with her mother for divorcing her partner and the friends who mock her more than the people who just accept her as a woman. We see Agnete through her eyes, explaining why cis male actor Mikkel Boe Følsgaard was cast, because Emma never stops seeing her as her 'dad' in women's clothing. By aligning our gaze with Emma, Reymann creates a potentially dangerous perspective wherein we are never allowed to see Agnete as the woman she is.

The film isn't committed to a gender binary. Emma is described as a 'football girl' by Agnete from the first bit of home footage, a device used throughout the film to cling on to the past rather than letting go of Agnete's years of dysphoria. Reymann insists that you can be masculine or feminine without changing sex, which in *A Perfectly Normal Family* is presented as binary. When trans* people continue to face horrendous abuse, films like this can be actively dangerous in questioning their identities. After all, Reymann never extends that scrutiny to the cis characters in the film. **LILLIAN CRAWFORD**

ANTICIPATION. *Reymann experienced this story first-hand, but it seems strange to have cast a cis man as a woman.* **2**

ENJOYMENT. *The sort of film people might have applauded in the '90s that already feels dated.* **1**

IN RETROSPECT. *Watch Netflix's* Disclosure *instead; Jen Richards beautifully articulates why cis casting must stop.* **1**

Isadora's Children

Directed by **DAMIEN MANIVEL**
Starring **AGATHE BONITZER, MANON CARPENTIER, JULIEN DIEUDONNÉ**
Released **2 SEPTEMBER**

Among the most influential figures in dance of the 20th century, Isadora Duncan faced a horrible tragedy in 1913 when her infant children both drowned while in the care of their nanny as their runaway car plunged into the Seine. During her grieving process, Duncan choreographed a three-part piece called 'Mother' as a means to express her heartbreak. Written and directed by former dancer and acrobat Damien Manivel (who won the Best Director prize at Locarno in 2019), the delicate and deliberately-paced *Isadora's Children* is cut into three distinct parts, each exploring how the lives of three sets of women – all of different ages and backgrounds – are touched by 'Mother'.

In the first section, a pensive young choreographer (Agathe Bonitzer) feels her way through the piece's movements and studies Duncan's writings. The second concerns a more talkative older dance teacher (Marika Rizzi) and her early teens student (Manon Carpentier) rehearsing 'Mother' for a recital. After that performance (which is unseen), the final stretch follows an elderly audience member (Elsa Wolliaston) moved to tears by what she has seen. Manivel captures her solitary journey home and observes how 'Mother' sticks with her long into the night.

Wolliaston, who plays the concluding part's unnamed protagonist, is in real life a choreographer living in France, attributed with helping develop contemporary African dance in mainland Europe in the 1970s. In the context of the film, she's not presented as having any apparent ties to dance in a professional capacity, but as someone so deeply touched by the evocation of maternal grief that she's inspired to perform 'Mother' from memory in her home, her sole audience being any spirit linked to the young boy in a framed photograph next to which she lights a candle. In a film filled with a palpable, intense love for the desire to emotionally connect to art, this finale proves transcendent. **JOSH SLATER-WILLIAMS**

ANTICIPATION. *Damien Manivel's* Le Parc *showed a penchant for experimental narratives.* **3**

ENJOYMENT. *Utterly transfixing once you're on its wavelength(s).* **4**

IN RETROSPECT. *A very moving, tender expression of art resonating through generations.* **4**

Karlovy Vary
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BFI LONDON
FILM FESTIVAL
OFFICIAL SELECTION 2019

★★★★
"NOTHING SHORT OF POETIC"
RADIO TIMES

"A TOUCHING, THOUGHTFUL
AND GORGEOUSLY SHOT PIECE"
SCREEN INTERNATIONAL

HENRY GOLDING

PARKER SAWYERS

MONSOON

A FILM BY HONG KHAOU WRITER AND DIRECTOR OF LILTING

★★★★
"AN ELEGANT STUDY OF CULTURAL
ALIENATION AND DISPLACEMENT"
THE SKINNY

★★★★
"BREATHTAKING HEALING JOURNEY"
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Summer Of 85

Directed by
FRANÇOIS OZON
Starring
FÉLIX LEFEBVRE
BENJAMIN VOISIN
PHILIPPINE VELGE
Released
2 OCTOBER

4

ANTICIPATION.
A love affair between two gorgeous boys? Set in the 1980s? Yes please.

4

ENJOYMENT.
A strange and captivating mix of sincere emotions, passions and Rod Stewart.

4

IN RETROSPECT.
An unassuming but potent look at the way young love bruises but forges identity.

Prolific French auteur François Ozon is known for his strange and alluring cinematic cocktails of sex, passion and tragedy. His characters are pushed to destructive extremes of feeling. *Summer of '85* does not stray from that tradition, but centring on a love affair between two young men, it might be the director's most explicitly gay film to date, which has a whole host of implications for the tone of the film.

The queerness of Ozon's films most often shines through his morbid interest in stories of straight people pushed to extremes by ideals of heteronormativity that they fail to live up to — ideals that are thus implicitly criticised and mocked, but which the director clearly revels in as the great tragedy fodder that they are. In no way subtle, his films are often outrageously tongue-in-cheek in the way they have their cake and eat it too, squeezing all the pathos out of their subject all the while basking in the ruins.

This time Ozon focuses on a gay love affair and his bracingly in-your-face style seems to be on the side of the passionate lover rather than against him. Alex (Félix Lefebvre, whose magnetic presence should make him a star in no time) begins the story of a daydreaming, yet relatively down-to-earth, 16-year-old obsessed with death the way many kids his age often are. When he is rescued from potentially drowning by David (Benjamin Voisin), a confident and charismatic 18-year-old, Alex is drawn into the young man's world almost against his will: David invites him home, where his exceedingly sweet mother (Valeria Bruni Tedeschi) gives him a bath, dries his clothes and offers him a meal. How could he say no? As David makes grand statements about the two boys' friendship, despite the fact that they've only just met, Alex is initially confused and surprised. But he soon gets a taste for the unconditional and unbridled affection placed on him by David and his mother, and it isn't long before he comes to expect and rely on his new friend's attention — with disastrous and tragic consequences.

Alex loves the way young and inexperienced teenagers often do, but rather than mock or chastise him, the film quite remarkably manages to do justice to his feelings and desires, all the while portraying them for the dangerous delusions they are. This is in large part due to the fact that Alex himself is telling us his own story, racked with guilt and regret, reflecting on what went wrong while sitting on a court bench, handcuffed for a crime only revealed later on in the film. But Ozon and cinematographer Hichame Alaouie also side with the young man, bringing his candid and romantic vision to life via bright, pastel colours, redolent of the romantic hues of the 1980s French seaside all around him.

Ozon's interests find their mirror in Alex's own, and the director's unsubtle, sometimes heavy-handed style is perfectly at home re-telling the young man's story. The intense performances, the almost otherworldly beauty of the cast and setting, the bluntness of some of the dialogue and the fact that Rod Stewart's 'Sailing' feature so prominently all make sense in the context of a creative teenager's own recollection of his doomed first love. That is why, as over-the-top and broad as it sometimes is, *Summer of 85* is also one of Ozon's most moving films to date. **ELENA LAZIC**

Interview by **ELENA LAZIC** *Illustration by* **RUMBIDZAI MARILYN SAVANHU**

Antonio Campos

The Devil All the Time **offers a scorched treatise on a godless America – and its director goes all-in.**

Director Antonio Campos is obsessed with the dark, mysterious predelictions in the soul of Americans, as seen in his films *Afterschool*, *Simon Killer*, *Christine*, and now *The Devil All the Time*, a sprawling hardboiled thriller which takes a bone-chilling plunge into the dark heart of an Ohio community abandoned by God and whose denizens are looking for Him in all the wrong places.

LWLies: With your previous works *Afterschool*, *Simon Killer* and *The Sinner*, it's clear you're interested in normal people who do horrible things. It seems logical you'd eventually make a film featuring serial killers. Campos: There's this correlation between the birth of the highway system in this country and the rise of serial killers, between the end of World War Two and the 1960s. Roads are so important in the movie, connecting people in positive ways but also allowing some to do very bad things. Serial killers that operate on the road haven't been seen in movies that much. One of the things we focused on was building out the Sandy role [Riley Keough], trying to ground that story in her perspective rather than in her husband's [Jason Clarke]. You have this person who is complicit in serial killing, but in the same way that someone in a toxic relationship just can't figure out how to get out of it.

The characters often affect each other's lives without realising it. How did you find the balance between this larger perspective, and their individual actions and destinies? It was about letting the audience know that they were in the hands of a narrator who saw way ahead of them, planting the seed that allows the viewer to wait for something to happen without realising that they're waiting. It was important that you felt like you had just enough time with the character but that the spine of the movie was intact and that it was working towards some kind of resolution.

At the same time, making movies is about capturing moments. One of my favourites is when Sebastian Stan's sheriff character slams the door and Riley blows a raspberry. That came on the third or fourth take, and it was great. I think that in order for the whole thing to work, you have to make sure that isolated moments are rich and specific. All that stuff adds up to make the person feel real, and the more fleshed out someone feels, the more invested you can be in the story.

The film is so much about godlessness and people feeling like they don't have any direction in life, yet there seems to be a sort of spirituality at work in the way things resolve themselves. There was a very conscious sense that we didn't want to portray miracles. We didn't want to get into whether there is a god or not. We're observing people who really believe there is a God and are willing to do extreme acts to prove their faith, but it was about allowing the film to play with those ideas without being overtly spiritual. The film is interested in the question, 'do things kind of resolve themselves by chance, or is there some other cosmic force at play?' None of these characters know that their lives are connected, or that things are balancing out the way that they are, because it takes so long for all that to happen. The film is exploring that idea without ever saying it. It's something we wanted to be felt. '

How did you approach working with such a big ensemble cast? Part of my job as a director is to learn how to speak the actors' language, and not for them to learn how to speak mine. On *The Devil All the Time*, I enjoyed the challenge of working with so many different actors on so many different stories that weren't in direct connection. Eliza [Scanlen] never has a scene with Sebastian, Riley or Jason, but they're all part of the same world. The challenge is making sure that all these actors, who are not working together, all feel like they're speaking to each other in some way.

What was it like working with Tom Holland and Robert Pattinson? Tom and Rob are such professionals. They're so committed, and they don't get involved in anything that they don't feel 100 per cent about. I never thought of Tom as Spider-Man and Rob wasn't even cast as Batman yet. I know that they come with that stuff, but when we're in the world of Knockemstiff, we're just playing in that universe

The Devil All the Time *screens on Netflix 16 Sept.*

Words by **ADAM LEE DAVIES**

The Stud / The Bitch

A new Blu-ray twofer of Joan Collins-based erotica leads us to ask why the UK was so prude when it came to sex on screen.

Deep Throat, the 1972 crossover pornographic film about a woman whose clitoris is located where her tonsils should be, was a sensation. It boasted sterling production values, a coherent plot, tip-top picture quality and scads of filthy bongo. It also made a fortune, ushered in an era of 'porno chic', was discussed in polite society and counted such groovy hipsters as Jack Nicholson, Frank Sinatra, Barbara Walters and US Vice President Spiro Agnew among its champions. Sadly for British sex-questers, the UK censors turned up to the party like an irate neighbour and banned the film from Her Majesty's cinemas.

As was the case for much of those bleak, blasted '70s, Brits would have to simply make do and mend. Swingers, priapic teens and members of the dirty mac brigade looking for skeezy sub-equatorial fireworks, resorted to skimming through the pages of *Amatuer Photographer*, poring over adverts for Yugoslavian nudist beaches advertised in the back of the Sunday supplements and sitting through thinly-veiled 'betterment' documentaries such as 1970's *Censorship in Denmark: A New Approach*. 42nd Street – invitingly described by the *New York Times* as, "an unmistakable vista of sexploitation gone berserk" – never seemed further away.

There was plenty of home-brewed cinematic titillation to be had, but it was very much of the end-of-the-pier, slap and tickle variety. 1969's *The Nine Ages of Nakedness* claimed to feature "150 topless international lovelies," while *Four Dimensions of Greta* from 1972 – the first British 3-D film – promised, "A girl in your lap". But frivolities like *Can You Keep It Up For a Week?*, *Confessions of a Window Cleaner*, *The Amorous Milkman* and *I'm Not Feeling Myself Tonight* were never going to deliver the hardcore grumble that a randy nation demanded. Enter actress Joan Collins and her bestselling author sister Jackie.

After a stint as 'Britain's Bad Girl' in various '50s delinquent dramas, Joan Collins hit Hollywood hard, starring opposite the likes of Richard Burton, Paul Newman and Gregory Peck for the remainder of the decade. But after throwing a monster hissy-fit when Elizabeth Taylor pipped her to the title role of *Cleopatra* (1960) she was busted down to TV guest star roles, British potboilers and Italian farces (including *L'Arbitro*, which revolves around a sexed-up football referee). Then, in 1977, she hit rock bottom with "career-low" (her words), the giant insect howler *Empire of the Ants*. Jackie, meanwhile, had been pumping out steamy romance novels since the '60s and her career was on a constant upswing. Together with their husbands – in Joan's case former Beatles manager Ron Kass, in Jackie's, nightclub owner Oscar Lerman – they set about putting together a sleek, sexy stag film that would relaunch Joanie's sputtering career.

1978's *The Stud*, directed by Quentin Masters, is a very cleverly packaged film indeed. Milkmen are left choking down puns about 'double cream' while window cleaners squeegee away salt tears as we jump in the back of Joan's Rolls Royce and head 'up West' to London's Glitzy Soho™ for a midnight prowl through casinos, discotheques, Belgravia townhouses and a vast Turkish bath house that looks like an abandoned beta test for Minecraft's MC Escher career mode. Joan plays Fontaine Khaled because of course she does. Fontaine has an absentee husband, a frisky daughter, an ailing nightclub called Hobo, a studly toyboy and shaky access to the first class lounge of life. Repeatedly mash all of those things into one another and you not only get the plot of the film, but also the secret of the film's huge success.

The Stud (known in Brazil as *The Stallion and the Whore*, which is fair enough) sells the sizzle, not the steak. There's no more actual X-rated material here than in *The Ups and Downs of a Handyman*, but there's a lot more erotic escapism in simply lighting Joan Collins's silver cigarillo in a fully-carpeted Mayfair penthouse than in watching a bored suburban hausfrau 'having it off' with the bloke who's come to paint the shed while her commuter husband whimpers through a knee-trembler with the trolley-dolly on the 8:15 to Paddington. *The Stud* has an aura of glitz, a recognisable star and a chart-topping tie-in disco soundtrack album. Indeed, it was more than enough ammo for Dad to convince Mum that this was a Proper Film and to accompany him to the local fleapit for a couple's night out – thus doubling the film's box office.

The marketing may have gotten people through the turnstyles, but the film itself – forced-bi Turkish bath sex-swing orgy notwithstanding – is all but unendurable. The plot is stupendously dull, the disco numbers are third-tier, the dialogue nonsensical, the editing random and the whole thing looks like it was shot on a film stock that was distilled from old bus tickets and processed through expired nicotine. *The Stud* nevertheless made a mint and Jackie was fast-tracked to come up with a sequel. But what to call it?

The Bitch (1979) was even more successful. The poster, which features Joan in a black corset, furs and a peaked chauffeur's cap against a blood-red backdrop, is perfectly modulated to keep the target audience – sexually frustrated middle-aged men with a World War Two fetish – completely on side. All that's missing is a swastika. Expectations were high. Sadly, the film is pretty much a carbon copy of its predecessor, but it's at least clear that lessons have been learned. This time we're trans-Atlantic, as evinced by some incomprehensible NYC helicopter footage and a game of backgammon in the decade's worst approximation of a 747 swingers' lounge. You can see what's happening, there are colours other than brown and a handful of disco denizens are under 45-years-old, which is all for the good. But it's also clear that the first film's success has catapulted Joan's perception of herself straight back into the celluloid firmament and she does far more strutting than rutting this time out. A shame

The Bitch *and* The Stud *are released on Blu-ray by Screenbound Pictures in November.*

LITTLE WHITE LIES Home ENTS

UK DISTRIBUTION

The Fu Manchu Cycle 1965-1969

Directed by
DON SHARP, JEREMY SUMMERS, JESÚS FRANCO

Starring
CHRISTOPHER LEE

1965-69

Released **20 APRIL**

Blu-ray

"He's cruel, callous, brilliant and the most evil and dangerous man in the world." He's "insane for power... a fanatic in the east;" the Dr Mabuse of the 'yellow peril', a turn of the century racist construct that sought to stigmatise Asians as an existential threat to western culture. He's an archetype in the annals of literary and cinematic villainy, the inspiration for Ian Fleming's Dr No and custodian of the iconic moustache that bears his name.

Introduced by English author Sax Rohmer across a series of pulp novels in the first few decades of the 20th century, Fu Manchu has remained a figure of extensive debate in Orientalist studies, one given further controversial charge by his portrayal on screen (across more a dozen features and serials) by white actors made-up in yellowface. The most famous is likely Boris Karloff in MGM's camp marvel from 1932, *The Mask of Fu Manchu* directed by Charles Brabin. And the less said about Peter Sellers and *The Fiendish Plot of Fu Manchu* – a modern comedy adaptation of the material directed by Piers Haggard in 1980 – the better.

While Sir Christopher Frayling's excellent tome 'The Yellow Peril: Dr Fu Manchu and the Rise of Chinaphobia' offers a deeper dive into the complexities of the Edwardian super-villain's pop-cultural evolution, he's also on hand in this new collection of the late-'60s Fu Manchu features from Powerhouse Films with a contextual video essay on the series' ethnocentrism.

Christopher Lee stars as the criminal mastermind in the five films collected here which, questions of central casting aside, prove much more benign in content than their outrageous pre-code antecedent. Much of the supporting cast is populated with Asian actors, not least Tsai Chin as Fu Manchu's daughter Lin Tang who, when Sir Christopher becomes increasingly somnolent as the series progresses, quietly emerges as the star of the show, with the imperialist-minded Brits usually the butt of a given joke.

All the films follow the a similar template: police commissioner Nayland Smith and his pathologist pal Petrie (a bob-a-job Holmes and Watson) suspect Fu Manchu is up to his old tricks, plotting world domination by freezing the ocean or setting a bevvy of weaponised babes after his arch rivals. Plot foiled – "Not this time Fu Manchu!" – and the evil genius promises his return.

Written and produced by Harry Alan Towers, a true independent in British film production, these films are cheap and cheerful adventure yarns (big emphasis on the cheap) that trade in balsa-mounted exoticism. Aesthetic mileage may vary from picture to picture depending on your preference for the handsome 'Scope location photography of the first film versus the grimy, colour-gel expressionism of the last two. Count us in favour of the latter, especially when captured with the ubiquitously leering sleaze-zooms of director Jess Franco, himself no slouch when it comes to punching out shoestring shockers.

Though these films combine a certain cinematic and historical value, Christopher Lee offered a more withering take: "My confidence in *The Face of Fu Manchu* was justified. The picture did well. *The Brides of Fu Manchu* was tosh. *The Vengeance of Fu Manchu* took me to Hong Kong for some excellent golf. *The Castle of Fu Manchu* introduced me to golf in Barcelona." **MATT THRIFT**

LITTLE WHITE LIES Home ENTS

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Knock Off

Directed by **TSUI HARK**	**1998**
Starring **JEAN-CLAUDE VAN DAMME** **ROB SCHNEIDER** **LELA ROCHON,**	*Released* **28 SEPT**
	Blu-ray

While John Woo enjoyed major success transitioning to the US following the breakout international acclaim of 1989's *The Killer*, and Johnnie To has in recent years amassed a cult following as one of the leading lights of Hong Kong action cinema, one of their contemporaries remains criminally underserved in the west. Tsui Hark is a genre polymath; a restlessly energetic director and producer of seemingly boundless invention and agility. From the new wave nihilism of *Dangerous Encounters: 1st Kind* to the genre and gender subversions of *Peking Opera Blues*, from the screwball blocking of *Shanghai Blues* to the formal blitzkrieg of *The Blade*, to see Tsui attack a set-piece is to witness a masterclass in wit and clarity when it comes to action-staging and montage.

Tsui made three films largely in English, of which *Knock Off* is the last and most berserkly wondrous. Jean-Claude Van Damme was off his face and heading straight to video, having passed his early-'90s theatrical peak when he tapped Tsui and compatriot Ringo Lam for a handful of features in a bid to ride the Heroic Bloodshed wave and replicate the success of Woo's *Hard Target*. The plot is a doozy, with JCVD starring as a fashion designer in Hong Kong on the eve of the '97 takeover, embroiled in a plot by Paul Sorvino to embed tiny bombs in pairs of fake jeans, export them to the US and blow them all up. Tsui directs with delirious abandon, unperturbed by physical or gravitational restrictions when it comes to camera placement. The shoe-cam alone is an insane wonder, and while the sight of the Belgian bruiser being slapped on the arse with an eel in a rickshaw race with Rob Schneider brings easy laughs, the joke's on the viewer who misses how tightly Tsui cuts it all together. **MATT THRIFT**

Ivans Xtc

Directed by **BERNARD ROSE**	**2000**
Starring **DANNY HUSTON** **PETER WELLER** **ANGELA FEATHERSTONE**	*Released* **28 SEPT**
	Blu-ray

It's a bold move to plant a thumbed Penguin Classic copy of Leo Tolstoy's 'The Death of Ivan Ilyich' in the opening-credit drag to your contemporary, LA-set update of Leo Tolstoy's 'The Death of Ivan Ilyich'. And yet, this is certainly one of the more interesting and innovative literary adaptations of the new century, drawing out the essence of this dark, brooding, pessimistic novel and tossing it at a world of gaudy movie premiers, pool parties, sharkskin suits and all-night coke binges. Danny Huston, in what was arguably his breakthrough role, plays slick-as-shit Hollywood super agent Ivan Beckman who has just managed to bring Peter Weller's obnoxious leading man Don West into the fold. Unfortunately, he's been experiencing sleepless nights and loss of breath, and a trip to doctor reveals a cancer on the lungs. Cue Ivan having to wisecrack, cheer and engage in macho horseplay with his new client, while the knowledge of his terminal prognosis is kept locked behind a rictus grin.

The tragic (and then some) overture to Wagner's *Tristan and Ilsode* thunders over the soundtrack, signalling that all is unlikely to be well in the end, and sure enough, Ivan experiences the negative impact of his condition long before he's been able to amply reflect on the hedonistic life he's led. Alongside 1992's *Candyman*, this remains one of director Bernard Rose's most enduring and original works, not least because it was shot on a handheld, circa-2000 DV camera and the visuals are murky, oversaturated and pixelated – though not always to the story's detriment. The film was intended as an entry into the Dogme95 canon, but ended up breaking too many of the rules, though it still has that rough-hewn, experimental feel to it and a louche naturalness to the performances that embraces improvisation and actors talking over one another. **DAVID JENKINS**

LITTLE WHITE LIES Home ENTS

UK DISTRIBUTION

Mademoiselle

Directed by
TONY RICHARDSON

Starring
JEANNE MOREAU
ETTORE MANNI
KEITH SKINNER

1966

Released **21 SEPT**

Blu-ray

"Ere look, it's mademoiselle," cries a boy as his schoolteacher (Jeanne Moreau) walks – windswept, wearied and somewhat wraithlike – out of the forest and back to the nearby town. Before there is a chance to question where she has been or who she might have been with, this teacher tells a mob of villagers that, "it was him", before climbing into bed, bedraggled but hardly beaten. These three words are all it takes to send the town on a witch-hunt, condemning an innocent man for crimes she herself has committed. In Tony Richardson's *Mademoiselle*, someone in this rural settlement (filmed in Le Rat, in Southwest France) has been poisoning animals, setting fire to houses and flooding farms, seemingly without motive. The townspeople – all highly prejudiced and unafraid of showing it – are quick to suspect an outsider, and a threateningly handsome Italian man (Ettore Manni) who works as a tree-feller fits the bill.

Mademoiselle was one of several deviations for the British filmmaker better known for films like *Look Back in Anger* or *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*. A slow and oddly understated film, suspense rises throughout as it switches between the xenophobic tensions mounting between the villagers and this seasonal labourer, and the erotic fixation the repressed teacher has with him. And yet the film somehow never really reaches the crescendo these overlapping conflicts suggest. Jean Genet's screenplay went through a number of re-writes before Richardson himself took over , and the film is clumsily scripted and structured as a result, somehow both silly and self-serious. It is arguably saved by Moreau's performance and some indelible (if also near-comically Freudian) images – such as when the ever-virile woodcutter seduces the pent-up mademoiselle with a snake wrapped round his waist like a belt. **MATT TURNER**

Made In Hong Kong

Directed by
FRUIT CHAN

Starring
SAM LEE
NEIKY YIM HUI-CHI
WENDERS LI

1997

Released **21 SEPT**

Blu-ray

For director Fruit Chan, his 1997 film *Made in Hong Kong* represents, "a kind of deadline, an end to a historical period." The first in his 'Handover Trilogy', the film was released just after Britain passed Hong Kong over to Mainland China and has been largely out of circulation since. Watched now, as the Hong Kong pro-democracy protests continue and another historical period for the city looks likely to come to an end, the nihilistic resilience of the film's characters, despite the grim situation they face, takes on a new resonance.

The film was made on a minuscule budget with the help of many friends calling in industry favours, and the then long-serving assistant director Chan threw a lot of ideas at the wall. The result is impressive, a genuinely eclectic and energetic film that is awash with vibrancy and aesthetic excess that counters its bleak subject matter and disillusioned protagonists. In it, Moon (Sam Lee), a charismatic young delinquent works odd jobs for various triad masters before finding a blood-stained letter that changes the direction of his life. All the characters in the film are heavily flawed, and no aspect of HK society avoids critique from a filmmaker who was obviously angered by both the direction he saw his homeland going, and the actions of the actors who had led it there. Some may argue that the film is more style than substance: with its bold colours, choppy slow-motion scenes, kinetic handheld camerawork and consistently off-kilter compositional sense, it can sometimes feel like an extended music video. However as a city portrait it really gets to the essence of something. All the officials are corrupt, the infrastructure and basic services broken, and violence is both petty and constant. Everything is doomed but all the youth can do is continue to fight and survive. **MATT TURNER**

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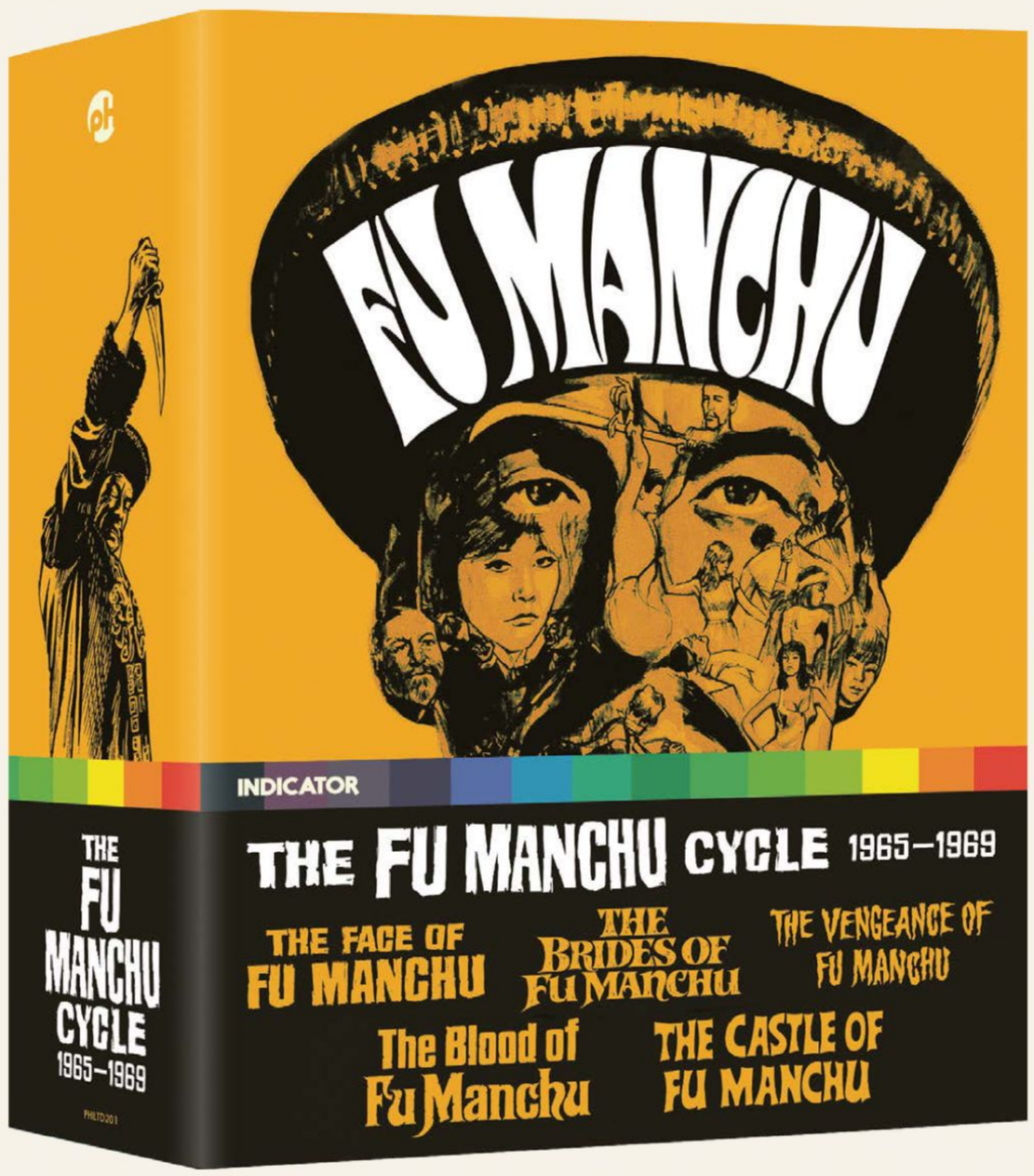
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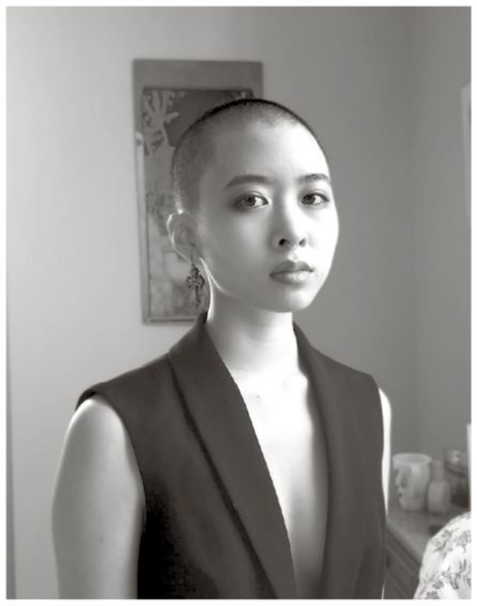

Illustrators

Isip Xin (cover) is an Asian-American illustrator and comic creator based in NYC. She is a lover of the dreamlike fringes of reality, and explores that in her work. She uses a combination of digital, acrylic, crayon, oil pastel and ink. Her portrait of Elisabeth Moss as Shirley started with general shapes laid out in pastel and paint. On separate layers, details were hand-drawn and then digitally compiled to form the whole image. Digital finishing touches complete the piece.
isipxin.com

Jason Ngai is an Asian-Irish illustrator and graphic designer specialising in portraits and detailed scenes using traditional and digital techniques.

Adriana Bellet is an illustrator who delights in drawing spirited faces and colourful spaces. These days you will find her in her Stockholm home studio, with her iPad Pro, a cup of coffee, a sleeping dog and a very awake little baby intent on biting it all.

Miranda Harris is an illustrator based in Bristol, UK. She uses drawing, painting and printmaking in her work, which is often inspired by wild places and the sea.

Rumbidzai Marilyn Savanhu is a Zimbabwean illustrator based in Birmingham, UK. She loves fashion, film and music, and she spends most of her time hunched over her tablet drawing.

Sophie Mo is an illustrator and tattooist based in East London, working primarily by hand in black and white. She's into weird stuff.

Amy Moss is an illustrator based in Edinburgh. She likes drawing a whole lot, especially with some nice colour pencils.

Stéphanie Sergeant is a French illustrator/animator living and working in Poland. She mostly works with watercolour and animates in 2D. She likes spaghettis and the dark, long process of animation.

Oliver Stafford is a British graphic designer and illustrator currently living and working in Sydney. He often merges analogue and digital processes to create something that has a more tactile, handmade aesthetic. He enjoys Eccles Cakes and the feeling of sand between his toes.

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Feature writers

Anton Bitel is a freelance film critic for *Sight & Sound, Little White Lies* and others. He is a member of Online Film Critics Society and London Film Critics' Circle.

Christina Newland is a journalist on film, culture, and boxing for *Vice, Sight & Sound, BBC, MUBI, Empire,* and others. Her first book, an edited anthology called 'She Found it at the Movies: Women Writers on Sex, Desire and Cinema' was published in March 2020.

Jourdain Searles is a Black writer and performer living in Queens, New York. She specializes in film critique and has written for many publications including *Vulture, Vanity Fair* and *The New York Times*.

John Semley writes on film (and psychedelics) appears and his work has appeared in *The New Republic, Vice, The Baffler, the Guardian* and elsewhere. He splits his time between Toronto and Philadelphia.

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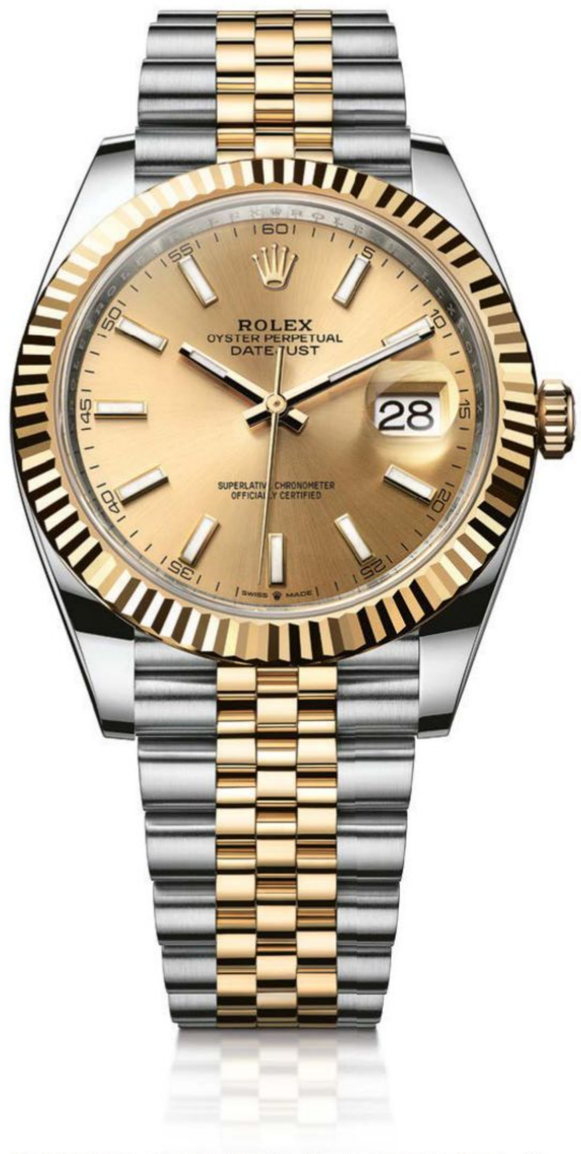

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